

JOURNEY INTO SPRING

WINSTON CLEWES

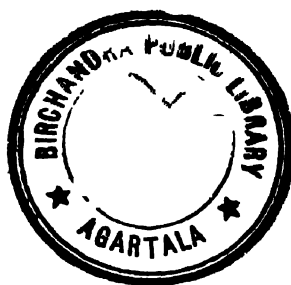
COMPLETE



UNABRIDGED

Journey into Spring

WINSTON CLEWES



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IN ASSOCIATION WITH
MICHAEL JOSEPH

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Chapter One

FOUR rails ran straight into the far distance until they came together in one glittering pinpoint; but just beyond the end of the platform a single track, two rails that did not glitter at all, branched sharply west and vanished, fifty yards away, up a wooded gap in the line of hills.

For the thousandth or ten thousandth time Fletton found suddenly that he could not wait. The warmth of the low evening sun, the quiet, the hills to the west and the plain to the east, the earth, the sky, were alike insupportable without action, movement in one direction or another. He turned sharply and picked up his bag. He despised himself for these overpowering quick impatiences, this being always at the mercy of a sudden unspoken and unexpected word of command. Contempt drew his lips into their bitter line and put acid on his tongue.

He threw open the door of the office, and the stationmaster looked round, startled.

'How far is it by road?' Fletton said.

'How far's what?' the stationmaster said.

'How far to Fletton?' Fletton said savagely.

'I told you,' the man began. 'There's a train —'

'I can't wait for your bloody train,' Fletton said. 'I'm going to walk. How far is it, you stupid idiot?'

'Now look here —' the man said.

'Oh, go to hell,' Fletton said.

He flung out, out of the office, out of the station, down into the dusty road.

The road ran past the stationmaster's cottage, and to the left, following the branch line. It began to rise where the rails entered the tunnel, and wound interminably up through the wood; the surface was loose and the slope steep; pebbles rolled down behind him. Then, at the trees'

end, it came out on to an upland of heather and furze, unhedged, and meandered away, gently ascending.

Miles on, where the moor met the sky, a kind of chimney sprang straight out of the ground, its mortar neatly pointed, its bricks bright red. There was no other building, no apparent reason for its existence. At its foot, Fletton sat down, sweating, and leaned against his bag. He took off his hat and put it beside him, wiped his forehead and lit a cigarette. The moor fell away on all sides: the shadows of clouds moved very slowly across it.

There was no sound at all. He smoked absorbedly, watching the paper of his cigarette scorch and blacken, the smoke flowing upwards into the still air. He was thirty, and looked ten years older, his face drawn into lines of nervous strain, his whole attitude unrelaxed. He finished the cigarette, threw away the stub, and stood up. He took two keys, tied together on a bit of greasy string, from his pocket, eyed them for a moment, tossed them into the air, caught them, and put them back in his pocket. He stretched out both arms from the shoulders, and yawned. At the peak of his yawn the earth trembled, very slightly; there was a low grumble of sound, just for a moment. He froze, looking instinctively upward, into the sky. A puff of vapour escaped from the top of the chimney. He dropped his arms and glanced at his watch.

It was fifteen minutes past eight, nearly two hours since he had left the station: the evening train to Fletton had just gone beneath him, through the tunnel.

The sun sank gradually out of sight, and the countryside below took on a new appearance at once mysterious and forlorn. A light or two twinkled dimly, betraying men's presence. A single breath of cold air, an earthy exhalation, passed over the moor. He picked up his bag and began to walk again.

The road now was soft underfoot, noiseless, no pebbles. The darkness thickened, he passed nothing to mark his progress; but behind him the shoulder of the moor hunched

itself higher into the sky, cutting a segment out of the tapestry of stars. He came down into trees again at last, and the sound of running water; and stopped to listen. Mingled with the chattering of the stream, he thought for a moment he heard, faintly, the ringing voices of trumpets. He shrugged and walked on: it was nothing – only the water.

He was tired, but his step quickened, leaving the trees behind. The road ran between low walls and the stream still followed; an occasional liquid murmur came from behind the wall on the left. He looked over it, but could see nothing; the stars had gone, the sky clouded; the wall itself seemed to glimmer with a kind of phosphorescence. He touched it, out of curiosity; it was made out of rough lumps of light stone, in places velvety with moss. He had the odd impression that small steeply pitched conical hills like the hats of witches rose here and there to either side of the road; it was difficult to be sure because of the oneness of the darkness. There was a feeling of rain in the air, moist and cool.

And the voices of the trumpets, at first in snatches, drifts of phantom rhythm; growing as he walked, the tune still indistinguishable but the rhythm taking body, acquiring a brassiness of texture that made the eardrums tingle. Imperceptibly the light grew too: somewhere ahead was light and blaring noise, so unexpected that he stopped to wonder.

Then the road turned sharply and crossed the stream over a low bridge into a street of low houses. There were lights in some of the windows, behind the drawn blinds. The doors abutted directly on to the narrow pavement. There was no movement, no one in sight, but the brassy music seemed magnified between the walls of the houses; it rang out loudly, completely irrelevant to their mean faces.

The street turned again, opening out into a space roughly square, paved with cobbles on which a fair was marshalled like a small bright noisy village within a village.

The line between the fair and the village that sheltered it was as sharply cut as a ditch; neither overflowed at any

point into the other. Both seemed lifeless; the village was withdrawn, almost resentful, the fair's noise as apathetic and lacking conviction as a performance of strolling players in an empty theatre. It was a poor little fair, with a helter-skelter, a small rink of dodgem cars, half a dozen stalls of hoopla, darts, a shooting gallery, a coconut shy with battered imitation coconuts, and a roundabout, from which the music came. People in its ways and byways might have hidden its tawdriness, but customers were few and backward. The stall-holders launched their appeals perfunctorily into the air, or read papers, or knitted

All the same it fascinated Fletton, as if he had been a child. He crossed the line into the light and walked slowly up and down the streets of the fantastic little settlement like a pioneer town stranded on a long forgotten frontier. He would have been glad to have found the enthusiasm to spend some money at one of the stalls, but the only one that attracted him was the rifle range, and the man in charge of that could be seen dimly in the rear pouring water from a kettle into a teapot. Fletton did not like to disturb him; in any case the attention a gunshot would have roused would have been too embarrassing.

He passed by, and came out on the far side, under the swinging sign of a public house. The Fletton Arms, the sign said, and below that: Peabody's Entire. There were two doors, side by side; one marked Private Bar, the other Public Bar. He chose the one marked Private, an empty choice, for both led into the same room, large, low, dingy. Under a single light at the counter a man in a check cap was staring at a half-empty glass; another, behind it, was polishing glasses. There was nothing festive about either, or about the notice propped against the handle of the beer-engine: no spirits, no draught beer, no cigarettes. He asked for a bottle of Guinness.

'No Guinness,' the man behind the bar said. 'Pale Ale or Brown Ale's all we have, and not much of that.'

He ordered a brown ale, and took a drink: it was like

‘bitter water, slightly sticky. The landlord went back to his polishing. Under his breath he whistled the tune the roundabout was playing, his face expressionless. He was very fat and had a black jowl. The lack of speech became oppressive. Fletton forced himself to say: ‘The fair’s empty to-night.’

‘Ah,’ the landlord said. ‘Saturday, that is.’ He took up the tune again; he did not seem to think his remark needed any amplification. The man in the cap finished his beer and said with explosive suddenness:

‘A week’s too long for a dump like this. I always said so.’

He did not look up. The landlord dropped one eyelid at Fletton; the rest of his face did not move. ‘Bloody foreigners,’ he said casually.

‘What’s that?’ the man said.

‘Bloody foreigners,’ the landlord repeated. He took up another glass and began to revolve it against the cloth in his hands. He looked at the man with an air almost of benevolence.

The man put both his fists on the counter. ‘Who is?’ he said softly.

‘You are,’ the landlord said, unmoved. ‘And this gentleman.’ He indicated Fletton. ‘And me.’ He held the glass up to the light. ‘Been here twelve years,’ he said. ‘And that’s what I am – a bloody foreigner. So they say.’

‘Aah,’ the man in the cap said. He pushed his glass across the counter.

‘Same again?’ the landlord said. He drew a bottle from under the counter, uncapped it, and half filled the glass.

‘People like fairs,’ the man said as if in expostulation.

‘You say so,’ the landlord said.

‘But God damn it,’ the man said, ‘– I know the place has a bad name, but after all we’re the first since the war – What do they like then?’

‘Twelve years,’ the landlord said. ‘That’s all I’ve been here –’

'Aah,' the man said. He emptied his glass and replaced it violently on the counter. 'They can rot for me.'

'They will,' the landlord said, to his back. The door banged behind him. The landlord put the bottle under the counter, rinsed the glass, and began to polish it. 'Stranger here?' he said to Fletton, who nodded. 'Walking?' the landlord said. Fletton said he was. 'It's nice country – or used to be,' the landlord said. He went along the length of the bar to fetch a stool, which he placed opposite Fletton, and sat down. 'It's my leg,' he said, explanatorily. Fletton felt his hair begin to prickle under the man's meditative incurious gaze.

'Are you always as quiet as this?' he asked.

'Not week-nights,' the landlord said. 'Quiet, yes, but usually somebody in. Saturdays –' He shrugged and drooped the corner of his lip.

'Why Saturdays?' Fletton said.

'They won't stay here,' the landlord said. 'Stewbury they make for – those that have the fare. Or there's The Harvesters – he's always full.' He looked Fletton in the eye, and grinned slowly, so that his great face became oddly engaging, childlike, mischievous. 'I hey don't like me,' he said.

'Why?' Fletton asked.

'I told you,' he said. 'Bloody foreigner, that's me.'

'Oh,' Fletton said. 'Don't you find it dull?'

'Quiet,' he said. 'I like it quiet. And if I didn't –' he left the sentence unfinished, but it remained in the air, like a challenge. 'Want another?' he asked.

Fletton hesitated. 'Please yourself,' the man said. 'You don't have to. It's getting on for time, that's all.' He heaved himself off his stool and leaned forward, suddenly. 'Tell you what,' he said. 'A drop of whisky?' He winked gargantuanly, raised a forefinger as if to say: Wait, and turned to the back of the bar. He took a bottle of whisky from a cupboard, got two clean tumblers, and filled them both nearly half full.

'But -' Fletton began.

'On the house,' the man said. 'Go on. Drink it. It's the right stuff.'

They both drank. Fletton felt the spirit begin to glow and burn in his stomach. The landlord smacked his lips and expanded his chest. 'That's better,' he said. They looked at each other with the beginnings of a smile, like conspirators. 'I know,' the landlord said: 'I know what you're thinking. "No Spirits," eh? Neither have I - for that lot. Riff-raff - and bloody hypocrites, what's more.' He drank again. 'Wouldn't waste it on 'em.'

'Not much profit in that, is there?' Fletton said.

'Profit,' the landlord said. He spat on the floor, behind the bar. 'If I was out for profits I wouldn't be here, would I now?'

'I suppose not,' Fletton said.

'Not likely,' the landlord said. 'No, I've got a nice bit of garden out back, and a paddock, and a cow. And the house is comfortable, though you mightn't think it. Come on,' he commanded, 'drink up.' He finished his own whisky, and Fletton too drank, obediently. He closed his eyes and felt the earth swing sickeningly in space. He had eaten nothing for ten hours. When he looked again the landlord was pouring more liquor into his glass.

'No,' he began.

'Don't be bashful,' the landlord said calmly. 'Want a room for the night?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'Thank you -'

'It's comfortable,' the landlord said. 'Clean too. The wife sees to that. We don't bother much with this.' He surveyed the bar with an expression of distaste.

'I'm sure it is,' Fletton said. 'But I'm fixed up.' He hesitated, feeling a sudden desire to tell this uncouth stranger who he was, why he was there. But the landlord nodded, and said at once: 'I just wondered'; and the moment was gone. A church clock began to strike the hour in a deep sweet tone. 'That's it,' the landlord said: 'Closing time.'

He grunted himself on to his feet. Fletton rose too. 'No need to go yet,' the landlord said. 'Unless you want to, that is.'

'I think I'd better,' Fletton said.

'Ah,' the landlord said. 'Your friends'll be expecting you, no doubt. Well —' he raised his glass, '— here's to knowing you better, Mr —'

'I'll drink to that,' Fletton said. They drank.

'My name's Ames,' the landlord said. 'George Ames.' He lifted a flap in the counter and came through. Fletton said nothing. He knew he was behaving like a churlish fool, but when it came to the point he could not bring himself to say: My name's Fletton; and then embark on the inevitable explanation. He followed the man across to the door, taking in half consciously the worn down-at-heel slippers, the dragging right leg, the shiny blue serge trousers; raising his eyes to the loose waistcoat-buckle, the collarless flannel shirt, washed threadbare, and the red neck with a fuzz of short black hair; thinking, this man is friendly, I like him.

The landlord held open the door. 'Well,' he said, 'good night, sir.'

'Good night,' Fletton said. 'And thanks — for the whisky.' He sought for more words, hopelessly.

'A pleasure,' the landlord said. 'Come in again. I like a crack now and then.'

'I will,' Fletton said. 'Soon.'

The landlord put a hand on his shoulder, a firm and somehow comforting pressure. 'That's right,' he said. Standing on the pavement, Fletton could hear him bolting the door.

*

The cool freshness of the night set his head swimming. He stood for a moment breathing snoringly through his mouth, distending his eyes in an attempt to take in and focus the

swaying lights of the fair. A wave of nausea lapped up and almost touched him; he shook his head rapidly like a dog, and turning, began to walk along the pavement, with the vague idea that if he walked fast enough, far enough, he might leave the nausea behind him. He had forgotten how tired he was; half-way round the adjacent side of the square weariness and the whisky in his legs brought him to a halt. There were steps on his left hand, stone steps, shallow and worn. He raised his eyes, and the church tower bowed down over him and rushed away, back up into the sky. Nausea enveloped him. He sat down on the second step and put his head in his hands.

A door opened behind him, at the top of the steps, and voices came down to him: a man's, the words blurred, then a girl's, high and clear, half laughing. 'You've been saying that all week,' she said. 'Now it's our last chance. Come on.'

'Oh well,' the man said, resignedly. The door closed; their steps descended on him and passed him. He did not look up. 'Did you get that?' the girl said, in front now. 'Whisky. Phoo.'

She thought I was drunk, Fletton said to himself, piecing the words together slowly in his mind. Maybe I am. Why shouldn't I be? No need to get so high and mighty about it. It isn't every day you make a friend in this cold and greedy world. That's something to celebrate, something to look back on: the day you meet a friend.

He forgot the girl, and thought warmly of George Ames. What I like about him, he told himself, is the way he doesn't ask questions. He thinks them, because he likes you, he's interested; but he doesn't press them. He doesn't set his teeth in your guts and drag and drag until he's got the whole of what you think and feel and fear and dream tumbled out on the pavement to sniff round and turn over with dirty paws. He respects you and lets you go. And just because of that you can talk to him, you can tell him –

Tell him what? You told him nothing. You snubbed

him; you banged the door in his face. He won't mind, being George Ames, he won't be hurt. It's you that's hurt, you fool. You hurt yourself by cutting yourself off so. You're lonely, and you hate being alone; you're melancholy, and you wish you were gay; you're cold, and you ache for warmth. You walk in the darkness, when you want lights –

He straightened himself, and looked at the fair. The nausea had left him; he looked at the lights coldly. I'm sick, he said to himself. Ill. I'm twisted up inside. The doctor was right: maybe I am headed for a breakdown. I'm seeing everything wrong. I sit here maundering about a friend, just because in that horrible pub I meet a man who hates his neighbours' insides so much that after twelve years they're still strangers. And there, out there in front: that's gaiety, that's life, that's enjoyment, and I can't see it. I've forgotten what enjoying means, I've nearly forgotten what living means. Those people out there are flesh and blood, and so am I –

With one of his abrupt decisions he stood up, picked up his bag, and plunged into the fair, driving himself against his weariness up and down its almost empty alleyways. He had been travelling since early morning, in physical discomfort and mental tension, and was nearly at the end of his endurance. He came to the roundabout, revolving dizzily, blaring out its raucous tune. There were only two people on it, a man and a girl: he followed them rather desperately with his eyes, round and round. The girl was riding a silver stallion with fierce red nostrils: it pawed the air in a frozen gallop, her fair hair streamed out behind her like a Valkyrie's. She was laughing and the man was laughing. This is it, Fletton thought, this is what was missing: laughter.

The roundabout slowed down; the man and the girl slid to the ground, just in front of him. The girl turned, and met his eyes fully; surprisingly, what seemed to be recognition appeared on her face. It startled him; he began to

walk away. She called out: 'Wait a minute': the voice of the girl who had thought he was drunk. He heard her say to the other man: 'Hurry, Ken. Hurry,' and their steps coming after him. He set his teeth and stopped, waited. They came round him and faced him, and he saw that the other man was blind; his eyes were as flat as paint. She was leading him by the arm.

'Who is it?' the man said. His mouth smiled uncertainly in expectation.

'It's -' The girl's voice trailed away. 'It can't be -' and then as if she still could not believe it, she said to Fletton: 'You aren't David, are you?'

He said: 'No,' and the man said: 'David? How could it possibly -?'

'I'm terribly sorry,' the girl said to Fletton. 'Forgive me. It's just - who are you, please?'

Fletton turned on his heel. 'What's happened?' he heard the man say. 'He's gone,' she said in reply. 'I think he was offended. I wish -' He walked on, head down, filled with an unreasonable black despair. David, he thought; she thought I was David, she'd forgotten he was dead. And if I had been David she'd still have forgotten. Anyway, you aren't dead, you bloody fool. There was no need to run away, you could have said something -

He collided with someone, and looked up, dazedly. It was the man in the check cap, who had been in the pub.

'Here, look out,' the man said. 'Where d'you think you're going?'

'Sorry,' he said automatically. He put a hand to his eyes; the man watched him curiously. 'This place,' Fletton said. 'It is Fletton, isn't it?'

'Drunk again, eh?' the man said sardonically. 'Yeah, it's Fletton - Fletton under the Hill, as they say. What of it?'

'Can you tell me where the Hall is?' Fletton said. 'Fletton Hall?'

'You can search me, chum,' the man said. He held out his hand, palm upward. 'Cripes,' he said. 'Rain. Now we

got everything.' He ran off between the stalls, shouting: 'Rain. Rain. Put 'em to bed.'

At once the lights began to go out; the music stopped; perversely there was a sudden feeling of life in the air. Fletton came out on the side opposite the church, and stared into the darkness. He made out two pillars of stone, stone walls funnelling inward to two similar pillars. He moved forward. There were two great iron gates, fastened shut with a chain, and a padlock.

He took the two keys from his pocket; the smaller one fitted the lock it turned gratingly and the lock came open. He put the keys back in his pocket, and pushed at the gate. It was as if someone were pushing against him on the other side: it would not move. He set his shoulder against it, and the right wing moved at last, enough for him to squeeze himself through. He put down his bag, and using both hands, closed it again. On the inside grass grew thickly up to it, grass and weeds. He put the chain and the padlock neatly together against one of the stone pillars. The pillar adjoined the wall of a little lodge, built of the same stone; the windows of the lodge were bleakly shuttered, the porch hung with cobwebs which smeared themselves wetly across his face; the doorstep was a mess of soggy leaves. He returned for his bag and began to walk up the drive between overhanging trees.

It was like walking through deep snow; he lifted his feet high, but tangled grasses dragged at his ankles and whipped about his knees; he could feel their cold damp touch through the cloth of his trouser legs. The darkness increased as he left the lights of the fair behind him, and after a few yards the drive began to bear away to the right. On the turn he looked back: the lights were fewer and lessened as he looked; they seemed a long way away. He went on.

It was very dark. He felt his way forward, gingerly; once he found himself among bushes: the leaves licked his

face, the rain whispered among the branches. He floundered back to the comparative openness of the drive, thinking: I should have brought a torch; not letting himself think: this is madness, coming like this in pitch dark night, you must be mad.

It was what he had made up his mind to do; he was going to do it. He was so tired he did not care what happened: all he wanted was to sleep.

The drive appeared to be rising upward, and curving again, this time to the left, and the trees had thinned away. He felt live air against his face; he came out on to open level ground. The house lay before him, spreading away to the left, towering above him.

It was built of the local light stone, with its odd glimmering quality; its size appalled him. He stood a long while before he moved, then shrugged. Well, Fletton, he said to himself, this is Fletton; now you know. He began to climb the steps before the portico.

The bigger of his two keys fitted the door, which opened quietly, like a black mouth, emitting a stale cold breath. Inside was virgin darkness; he could see nothing. He changed his bag to the other hand and took his lighter from his pocket. He lit it, held it high above his head, and went in, leaving the door open behind him.

There was another door to his left. He went through it into a room which felt large, and empty, and echoing. On his left again were tall windows, through which he could see the night, paler than the darkness of the house. This light makes it darker, he thought. He put out the light, and immediately the windows were all there was. He went delicately towards them, and stood looking at the dusty panes. The dust was so thick that the glass seemed opaque; he rubbed it with his hand, and peering, could see the faint light that signalized the village, in front and below. He put down his bag, opened it, and felt about until he found his flask. He took a long drink of the whisky it held, recorked it, and put it in his pocket. His eyes closed,

standing. He sat down with his back against the wall, pulled his coat round him; then he was asleep. He had lain harder, and colder, and still slept. It was neither the silence of the house nor its sudden noises that disturbed him, twitching restlessly at his muscles: it was something other, something inward.

Chapter Two

*

HE woke with a foul mouth, stiff and cold. He was lying in shadow, a ray of dusty sunlight falling obliquely across his ankles. He rolled over and pulled himself to his feet, yawned widely, and groaned; even his face felt stiff. He looked about him, blinking.

The room was enormously long and high. It was papered in white, mouldering here and there into faint greenish shadows. A great crack ran jaggedly across the ceiling of florid plaster, and down the wall opposite the windows. In the centre of the ceiling a medallion in low relief displayed nymphs and Tritons; from it hung a crystal chandelier, smoky with dust and draped with cobwebs; the crack ran round one side of the medallion so that it and the chandelier seemed dangerously ready to fall. At the far end of the room, opposite the door, a marble fireplace like a great sea-shell supported an overmantel of plaster in which the same nymphs and the same Tritons disported themselves even more riotously than on the ceiling. Two delicately spindly chairs of tarnished gilt stood before the fireplace with an odd look of intimacy, as though two people had just ended an exchange of confidences. They were the only furniture in the room.

He walked towards them across slanting bars of sunlight, yawning and scratching his head, his feet raising little puffs of dust from the thin old carpet on the floor. He sat down gingerly on the bursting seat of one of the chairs, and looked first at the floor, then at the pinch of ancient ash in the grate, then at the opulent marble above the grate. He said aloud: 'My God,' feeling the weight of the huge house press down on him. In a moment, and in quite a different tone he said: 'My God, I'm hungry,' and sprang

to his feet. He unbuckled the belt of his raincoat, took it off, and threw it at the other chair. He pulled at his tie and loosened his collar, went back to his bag, and squatted down beside it.

He began to rummage among the untidy mess of clothes and papers in the bag. He found a towel, which he flicked over his shoulder, and in a corner, an apple. He set his teeth into the apple, grateful for its cool acidity on his dry lips and tongue; and became aware of the warmth of the sun on his face. This swung him into a new direction. He put down the apple, stood up and went to the window; turned the catch with some difficulty, and tried to raise the heavy sash. It was immovable; after a time he gave up the attempt. Instead, with the side of his hand, he increased the size of the little porthole in the dust on the pane, where he had looked out the previous night. He put his eyes to it and looked again, but the window was dirty on the outside too, and the sunlight, striking down from the right, increased its opacity, so that all he could see was the green of trees and a pale sky. He glanced at his watch; it had stopped at twenty-five minutes to five; from the height of the sun it was obviously later.

He sighed. His failure with the window – not the physical effort but just the failure – sapped at his energy and took the life out of his movements. He turned slowly back to the bag, picked up the apple, and stood eating it, downcast. He finished it, and threw the core carelessly behind him. Bending, he hooked with his forefinger a string lying over the side of the bag, straightened himself and began to walk towards the door. A spongebag came out of the bag on the end of the string, pulling with it a miscellany of articles, a shirt, a couple of ties, a pair of trunks. Unregarded, these deposited themselves one by one on the floor; he swung the spongebag on his finger, and went through the door into the hall.

The room was large, but still too small for living in. The hall was cavernous, almost ecclesiastical, pilastered



and vaulted. Wide shallow stairs went up one side to a gallery that was nothing but panelled gloom. Under the gallery, opposite the entrance door, there was a door with an ornate casing, standing slightly ajar, and across the hall a similar door, closed.

It had been in his mind to find a bathroom and, casually, to have a bath. Now he stood overwhelmed by his own temerity, as though he had proposed bathing in a cathedral. He looked at the stairs, and from door to door, then crossed quickly to the entrance-door. He was surprised for a moment to find it unlatched, but pulling at it, he remembered that he had left it open: it must have closed itself during the night. Fresh moist air rushed in past him; he stepped out from the shadow of the portico into the sunlight. The terrace stretched away to right and left; tall grass grew between the flagstones; it was so broad that even from the top of the portico steps he could not see down over the balustrade that edged it, but merely over it, into the tops of trees. The house stood much higher than he had realized; the terrace was built along the edge of a little cliff, the driveway up which he had come in the darkness falling away out of sight to his left, curving down sharply into the trees. Straight ahead, in the brilliant morning mist, the squat square tower of Fletton church showed vaguely.

He stood for a few minutes longer, leaning on the warm stone of the balustrade; feeling again above him and to either side the weight of the enormous building. It became unbearable; he turned and faced the empty recesses of the hall, and shivered. It was like looking into the dark emptiness of his own mind.

Too big, he said, under his breath. I hadn't expected anything like this. I'd expected loneliness, but a small loneliness is comfortable; a loneliness this size is impossible. It'd get out of hand, you could drown in it and no one ever know. Someone should have told me; why didn't they tell me? I can't go on with it, I couldn't stand it.

Then he said to himself: you liar; and pushing himself away from the balustrade he re-entered the shadows of the hall. You liar, he said, going in: you've stood most things, you can stand anything. And don't think you can get away with that nobody told me stuff; they told you all right, but you wouldn't listen, you pretended not to hear. Because it was easier to run away than to stay and face yourself, just the same as it would be easier to run away from here than stay and face yourself here. But you're going to stay: you'll stay if it kills you, you've run as far as you're going to, you're at the end of your tether, you'll dig yourself in, and you'll like it, you liar, you poor empty thing

He stood at the foot of the staircase, looking upwards; but the darkness at the top, and the empty corridors and the empty rooms, stretching one beyond the other in his mind, were too much. Instead, he swerved aside, past the stairs, through the door beneath the gallery. Here he was at a kind of crossroad, with a corridor leading off to either hand, running the length of the house and ending in each case in a stair, windowed on a half-landing; in front, through another door, propped open, another corridor, shorter, and sunlight at the end of that. He plunged forward without pausing, and came to a halt in a small room with a skylight, through which the sun came. There was a table in the centre, and built-in dressers round the walls; all the proportions here were smaller, the ceiling lower; the doors to each side, the windows and door facing him, small, ordinary, everyday windows and doors. As he stood leaning on his hands on the table there was even a sound: a rat or a mouse gnawing, a tiny, industrious everyday sound.

He took a deep breath and thought: this is better, this is more like you, old boy. All that out there, all that grandeur, all your high and mighty ancestors looking down their ghostly aristocratic noses, all that's not your style. This is the place for the poor relation, in the kitchens. But behind his feeble self-raillery a smaller voice was whispering: panic, you nearly panicked then; and to avoid listening

to it, he wiped his forehead with the edge of the towel that still hung over his shoulder, changed the sponge-bag to the other hand, and looked into the room on his left.

This was a scullery, with slate sinks and huge blackened taps, and rows of slatted draining-racks above them on the walls; beyond that, the kitchen, cold black hearth and rusty monstrous ranges, and in a corner an enclosed stairway, leading upwards. He returned to the scullery, and tried all the taps in succession, but even using both hands there was only one he could move. It squealed painfully: no water came.

Damn, he said aloud, and bit his lip. No water, he thought – and no food either, come to that; and Sunday morning, miles from anywhere. No, damn it, he thought, there must be water: it's not a ruddy desert island. Water first, and food after: if I have a wash I shall be able to think straighter.

He went back into the skylight room, round the table, and opened the last door. It gave on a small paved yard, opening on to a larger yard, of cobbles; standing in the doorway and looking back, he could see at the end of a diminishing vista the sunlight in the portico, and infinitely small, the church tower. The sight gave him a disproportionate satisfaction; the fact that a tunnel pierced the great ponderous mass of the house from front to back lightened its menacing pressure and his spirits at the same time.

Well, now, let's see, he thought, if I know anything there should be a pump somewhere – It stood in the centre of the cobbled yard, with silent and shuttered stables on three sides, the house making the fourth. He crossed over to it, whistling softly. Going to be hot, he thought, and peered up at the sun, just coming into view round the corner of the house. The pump handle was warm to the touch, and pleasantly filled the hands, a great rust-pitted bar of iron. Now, he thought: we'll see. He raised the handle, and depressed it. A muffled subterranean clanking

came up the shaft. He laboured furiously; when he stopped he was breathless, but there was no water.

O God, he thought in disgust, does nothing work about this blasted place? He sat down on the trough under the spout, and looked at his hands. Well, he said aloud, there's plenty to do. That's what you wanted, isn't it? Come on: get on with it. He took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and replaced the packet. He stood up, slapping at his leg with a folded towel.

Decide where to live, he thought. It's all mine, and I've áll day, every day, and no one to butt in, splashing advice about the place, damn their eyes. I'm free to do what I like, when I like. And by God, I'll live out here, I like it here. It's quiet and warm and sunny and sheltered –

His eyes wandered round the yard, took in the stables, comfortable in old red brick, the blistered doors each in two halves, the mossy slates.

East, he thought: that's east, where the sun is. The house faced nearly north then, God knows why. To keep an eye on the village, I suppose: see no one walked off with the church. Well, they can have the village and the church, and every anointed soul in the congregation, for all I care. I'm living here, and I'll face as near south as I can –

He swung round. The end of the stable block nearest the house was a coach-house: above it, a dormer-window hinted at the coachman's dwelling.

That's it, he thought: that's me. He walked over to it. The doors were fastened with a heavy padlock, but the wood round the stable was rotten; he threw the towel over his shoulder and took hold of the padlock with both hands, and wrenched and twisted. The wood splintered and the staple came free. He opened the door and looked inside. There was a high dog-cart, standing forlornly, its shafts on the floor and one wheel drunkenly awry; he passed it, and found a ladder, leading up to a trap door. He began to climb; with his head through the trap the fourth rung cracked, but he held on to the ladder and looked round

the little room. The sun shone friendlily through the window; the roof was peaked and low; the air smelt of hay, and more distantly, of apples; but it was fresh.

This is it, he thought again: this is where I'll live. He scrambled down and smacked his hands together to rid them of dust. Plenty of time, he told himself, luxuriously; going out, he patted the dog-cart's wheel. Might see to you too, he said to it: you wait and see. But first, get the lie of the land – and find some water.

He felt full of energy, and full of pleasure. He walked across the yard, through the gate, and found another small court. To the right, leaning to the back of the stables, glasshouses ran away into the distance. There was a leaden cistern outside the nearest door, but the water in it stank abominably and looked thick, like black slime. He dropped his cigarette end into it and then opened the greenhouse door; the air in there was thick too, and marshy-smelling. There was a vine a little way down, with gnarled rheumatic branches, and bunches of grapes the size and colour of green peas. He did not go in, but shut the door and turned the other way.

Here he faced a wing of the house itself; out beyond it, to the right, the terrace began, with its balustrade broken by a flight of stone steps. He stood at the top and looked down the steps, but the tangled vegetation at the bottom offered him nothing; he started to walk along the terrace, along the side of the house. As he did so the sound of a bell came slowly up and met him: the church clock striking the hour. He counted absordedly as he walked, winding his watch: seven. Seven, he thought; no wonder it's quiet; and then laughed. Idiot, he said to himself: it'd be just as quiet if it were noon. This is the house of quiet –

He came out on to the main terrace and stopped. House, windows, portico; more house, more windows; terrace, terrace, terrace. Good God, he thought, what did they do here, how did they live? What were they? Kings? Lords of the earth, anyway – and this is what they've come to:

emptiness, and dust – and me, the last of the line, the ultimate fruit of the tree.

He turned his back on the house deliberately, in a kind of gesture of negation, and leaned on the balustrade. Below him, the ground dropped in a steep escarpment, covered with grass once clipped, no doubt, but now feathery with seed and rippling intermittently in a little breeze. More steps went down from this corner of the terrace, balancing the driveway at the other, turning back on themselves in successive flights. At the foot of the escarpment an ornamental water, irregular in shape, lay placid, fringed with rushes and set out with patches of waterlilies; but a ragged vista, partly filled with new growth, led the eye over the lake to the church tower at its end. Beyond that and to the right, through the thinning mist, small steeply-pitched conical hills –

Of course, he thought, the Folly. I should have remembered last night. Folly Mine, and the old workings. And this is the water that was the death of the mine and the death of the house. Water: my God, he thought, I was cursing because there was no water: here; and my name Fletton.

He looked down at the lake again; simultaneously the sound of a splash reached him, and out of a little creek half-hidden by bushes, a girl, swimming, came into his sight. Her body glimmered white under the greenish glossy water; he could see her feet fluttering in an easy crawl; her fair hair, uncapped, spread fanwise on the water behind her.

Partly from sheer surprise, partly from delicacy, to warn the girl, he shouted: 'Hey!'

She lifted her head, treading water, and looked round, then up; and then immediately turned and vanished, in a violent splashing flurry, back behind the bushes out of which she had come.

Without knowing quite why, he shouted again. 'Hey. You there. Come back,' and began to run down the steps.

He took them recklessly, two and three at a time, swinging round the corners at the full length of his arm. At the bottom two paths diverged, one to the left, towards the lake, the other to the right, into a dense plantation of young trees. He plunged leftward, round a corner between tall rhododendrons, and headlong over a fallen branch. He scrambled up, and on; the path was so overgrown that only the bushes edging it showed it to be a path; it followed the bank of the lake at a little distance, the water shining softly through the screen of leaves. Then turning abruptly it emerged at the head of the creek.

There was no one there, no sound. There was an ancient rotting punt, half under water, with yellow reedy flowers growing up through its floorboards; the far bank was bordered with flat stones to make a landing-place. On one of the stones was a great irregular patch of wetness, and beside it, the imprint of a small foot.

He stood looking at it, breathing hard. He made an inconclusive movement forward, then stopped again, thinking suddenly: What the hell; what was all that about? What was I supposed to be doing? chasing her or catching her? And suppose I'd caught her – what a damned good job I didn't, what should I have said?

Stupidly, his face began to burn; he turned away and looked across the lake to where the house lay back at the top of its cliff. The windows of the upper storey stared blindly down over the balustrade, the chimneys, smokeless, stood out white against the blue sky. The whole picture was so ageless, so changeless, so classical in its severe peace, that he caught his breath and for a moment forgot himself, and the girl, even the further background of his mind: Diamond Street, and his mother's relatives, the tobacconist's shop and his father's unmarked grave: even the salt-mine, and the guards, and the whips they carried.

Fletton, he thought in that moment: I wish I'd seen it before: Fletton. Immediately self began to flood back on

him; you're Fletton, it insisted. And a touch of sunlight doesn't turn a ruin into a palace, or that wreck into a boat. His eyes dropped back to the lake; he sighed. Water, he thought; well, here it is.

He began to take off his clothes, dropping them on the stones beside him. Half undressed, he paused, thinking of his razor, the spongebag. Where? His mind went back stage by stage: up the great staircase; the terrace; the stable-yard, the coachhouse; the scullery; and found the bag lying where he had tried the taps. He shrugged, and went on undressing. O.K., he thought: no shave. I'm not going mountain climbing for it.

He stood a moment naked on the edge of the little landing; expanded his shoulders and dived in cleanly. The momentum of his dive took him out beyond the creek; he swam a few yards, then turned over on his back and floated, closing his eyes against the sun. The water was very cold: he luxuriated in it, feeling its chill pierce and peel off layer after layer of fatigue and irresolution. When he opened his eyes he found himself in the possession of a gentle current: the terrace moved slowly past above him; the stairs were receding, the banks closing in, the current carrying him towards a miniature ravine. He rolled over and raised himself in the water, shaking his head, and saw that the ravine was crossed, high up, by a stone bridge. That must be the drive, he thought: odd I didn't notice the bridge last night. I was tired – and come to think of it, pretty drunk.

With that a picture of George Ames came very clearly into his mind. He frowned, and began to swim back up the lake. Drunk, he thought: I must have been maudlin. A revolting fat man in a dirty pub, and for two pins I'd have thrown myself into his arms. And that girl: what the devil was she after? I never heard that I was David's double, which means that she didn't know him very well. That being so, why the effusion? Why do people fling great octopus tentacles of acquaintance round you at the slightest

provocation? Why can't they ever let *you* make the advances?

He stood on the landing towelling himself, glowing, feeling the towel rough against the scars on his back. He found himself smiling; and the extraordinary thing was that he was smiling at himself, the first time for – he could not remember. Careful, he told himself, you might become human. What you need, he thought, with his head in his shirt, is to put your ideas in order. If you want to get back to life, don't shrivel up into yourself when someone else is ready to do part of the job for you. Meet them half-way, and don't call yourself maudlin because you feel inclined to.

The sun shone with a massive brightness; the morning was all gold; in his mind a gold web of a girl's hair spread almost as brightly: twice seen, once on a roundabout under naphtha flares, once like a net on the smooth water of the lake. Coincidence they both had hair like that, he thought, tying his shoes: or – were they the same? I wonder –

He stood up, knotted his tie loosely, and put on his jacket. He felt like a new man. Now, he thought, food. He spread his towel over a bush and left it there, glanced up at the house, and began to walk down the lake in the direction of the ravine and the bridge. As he went, the lake narrowed and the ground on his right hand began to rise. He had intended, vaguely, to climb up to the bridge and make his way down the drive; but a well-marked path ran along the edge of the water, and he followed it without being conscious of any particular change of plan, thinking, this must be the way she came; she, or someone else, must come often to make a track like this. Damned impudence, he thought, making free with private property; but damn it, why shouldn't they? There's been no one in the house for years, and they've done no harm, as far as I can see.

He passed under the bridge, looking up at its underside, at the tall stone buttresses that took the thrust of its graceful

span; thinking, money built that: they were quite a family in their time.

Both banks sloped away on the other side of the bridge, at first gradually, then more sharply; the water, now a stream not more than nine or ten feet wide, ran briskly, keeping pace with him, pierced here and there by spears of sunlight striking down between tangled trees. Then the track came to an abrupt end at a stone wall, while the stream went on through the wall as if through a gateway; a gateway whose pillars stood on either bank, supporting instead of gates two quarter circles of iron spikes, rayed like segments of a heraldic sun.

The wall was breast high, but he climbed it easily, finding toe holds where the mortar had crumbled, and dropped into a beaten path. Trees from behind the wall arched over the path, shadowing it, but on the other side it was bounded by a hedge, trimmed ruthlessly into sticks of splintered wood and interlaced with barbed wire; beyond that a wide featureless expanse of unripe corn went away to the sky, clothing the sides of the shallow valley that cupped the stream. The higher side of the valley was to his left as he stood, and in that direction the path after crossing the stream on stepping stones ran upward; to the right the path sank into a cut, between the wall and a steep bank, out of sight into dark shade.

He debated which way to go. The village lay to the right, obviously; he catalogued to himself with extreme reasonableness all the arguments against going in that direction. He was unkempt and unshaven, and would make a bad impression on a Sunday morning; it would be embarrassing to meet the man Ames, to confess that the alternative to his hospitality the previous night had been the empty desolate Hall. He might meet the girl who had been swimming: she would think he had followed her – O.K., O.K., he said to himself: you don't want to go to the village. Don't then; just admit you don't want to, admit you'll have to sooner or later – and take a day off.

He crossed the stepping-stones, whistling, and trudged up the hill, bending to the slope. Soon the path levelled off; the wall, and the trees behind it, still continued on the left; the trimmed hedge, and the cornfield, on the right. The corn, still bounded only by the sky, was flattened on the level in great swathes, as if a pack of enormous dogs had laired in it.

Bet the farmer was pleased about that, Fletton thought; and came suddenly to a place where the path dipped downwards and the wall turned away from it, leaving it between two fences of barbed wire and concrete posts. At the junction of wall and wire was a gate; over it a board like a signpost, roughly painted in white, announced: *Trespassers will be prosecuted. Keep out.* On the gate, under the notice, sat a young man about his own age, clad in army trousers and a faded blue shirt, open at the neck. An army haversack hung from one of the gateposts, a double-barrelled sporting gun leaned against that. The young man was eating sandwiches out of a package of newspaper. He nodded, and said: 'Morning.'

Startled, Fletton stopped and said: 'Good morning.'

'Made you jump, did I?' the young man said. 'Thought I should.' He took a bite of his sandwich, and added: 'I heard you coming.' He grinned, chewing.

'Oh,' Fletton said. 'Well -' He began to walk on, then stopped again and turned. 'Could you tell me,' he said: 'Where does this lead to?'

'Dimfold,' the young man said.

'Oh,' Fletton said. He found the young man disconcertingly casual. 'Thanks.'

'Cut through the farmyard,' the young man said. 'Brings you out on the Stewbury road. That's the castle - there. See the tower?'

'Yes,' Fletton said. 'I see. Thanks.'

'It's about four miles,' the young man said. 'Over there - under the cloud - that's Corby. Mucky hole - about seven

miles, though it mayn't look it. Have a sandwich.' He held out his package.

'Oh – thanks,' Fletton said. 'I don't think –'

'Come on,' the young man said. 'They're okeydoke: cold bacon. I made 'em – made too many: always do.'

'Well,' Fletton said. 'If you really –' The young man pressed the package at him. He took a sandwich, and bit into the soft new bread, while the other watched him.

'Jesus,' he said. 'Are you starving?'

Fletton licked his fingers. 'Pretty nearly,' he said apologetically. 'As a matter of fact, I was looking for somewhere to buy some food –'

'You've had it,' the young man said. 'Tek another. Carry on and finish 'em. I'm through, anyway.' Fletton looked at him doubtfully. 'Go on,' he said. 'I'd done.' He grinned again and put the package in Fletton's hand. He took a pipe and pouch from his pocket and began to fill the pipe. 'Stranger here, aren't you?' he said. Fletton nodded. 'Camping out?'

'Mm,' Fletton said. 'Sort of.'

'I live here,' the young man said. 'Worse luck. Farmer's boy, me.' He nodded down the hill. 'Settling down to help my dad in a life of honest toil.' He grimaced. 'That's what he thinks, anyway.' He eyed Fletton through a cloud of tobacco smoke. 'You're just demobbed too, aren't you?' he inquired.

'Just about,' Fletton said.

'Tell the old demob suit a mile off,' the young man said with satisfaction. 'What lot were you in, chum?' Fletton told him, with the usual explanation: captured at Dunkirk, prisoner six years. He had brought himself to a point where he could recite it without nausea, as though it were someone else's story. 'The old 8th, me,' the young man said. 'Africa and Italy – and now this.' He looked round the field as if he did not believe it. 'Well, it's a bloody business, all round. Civvy street, I mean. Eh?' Fletton shrugged his

shoulders. 'You can't tell 'em – the old folks – but wouldn't you sooner be back in the army?'

'No,' Fletton said.

'Tell yourself the truth,' the young man said. 'Didn't you have a damned good time – when you weren't in clink, I mean?'

'No,' Fletton said.

The other stared. 'No need to get snorty,' he said. 'I did – a bloody good time. Still, I was a sergeant; you'd be an officer.' Fletton nodded. 'Makes a difference.' He slid off the gate. 'Tell you what,' he said. 'You're looking for grub – it's lucky you met me: there's not a shop open in the county, Sundays, and the farmers are as mean as misery. But I can do you a few eggs, and a bit of bread, and a slice or two of bacon – to see you over till to-morrow. What say?'

'It's damned kind of you,' Fletton said. 'You'll let me pay, of course.'

The young man laughed. 'Of course is right,' he said. 'You don't know my dad.' He slid to the ground on the other side of the gate. 'Come on,' he said. 'We'll get the eggs first.' He waited while Fletton climbed the gate, slung the bag over his shoulder, and picked up the gun; he talked all the time, leading the way down a slope of poor tussocky grass, towards a kind of township of black hen houses. 'Know how to gut a rabbit? There's three in the bag – you can have one of 'em for nothing, if you keep quiet about it. Just won 'em, up by the wall. Cheapest way there is to please the old man – kids himself they come out of Fletton's pocket.'

'Whose pocket?' Fletton said.

'Fletton's,' the young man said. 'That's the name of the estate, inside the wall. You came up past it – allee likee jungle.'

'And your father – doesn't like it?' Fletton said.

'There's some folks,' the young man said oracularly, 'have a standing row with the weather, and there's others

takes it out of their mothers-in-law. My dad pins it all on Fletton, and the Flettons in general.'

'Why?' Fletton said.

'Who cares?' the young man said. 'Something some Fletton did to him, back in the Middle Ages. He's a bit balmy, I reckon.'

'My name's Fletton,' Fletton said. 'Godfrey Fletton.'

'Oh Christ,' the young man said. He stopped, and looked blankly at him. 'That's torn it.'

'I'm sorry,' Fletton said. 'I thought I'd better tell you.'

'That's all right,' the young man said. He scratched his head absently. 'My name's Lane,' he said. 'Jack Lane.' He knitted his brows.

'I'm sorry,' Fletton said again. 'I'd no idea – you won't want to sell me the eggs now, I don't suppose.'

'It's not the eggs I'm worrying about,' Lane said. 'We can half-inch those from the huts. It's the bread and the bacon. I don't see how I'm going to get them past the sentry.'

'Look,' Fletton said. 'I appreciate it no end, but I'd rather you didn't upset your father –'

'Why not?' the young man said. 'He upsets me, plenty. And I don't see why you should starve.'

'Please,' Fletton began.

'Oh, shut up,' Lane said rudely. 'Let me think, can't you.' He kicked at the grass with the toe of his boot, while Fletton waited. 'Now's the best time,' he said at last. 'You sit down here, and don't budge. It's your own field: the old man squeezed it out of the Agricultural Committee. So you're not trespassing. But if anyone comes by, for God's sake don't say your name's Fletton. Say you're waiting for me. Tek these.'

He went off down the field between the black huts without waiting for a reply, hands in pockets and shoulders hunched moodily. Fletton laid the gun and the haversack on the ground; there was nothing to do but sit down; he sat, listening to the hens stirring at the sound of Lane

going by. The young man cut across to the fence, ducked under it, and vanished into a grove of trees.

A damned good start, Fletton thought. First go off I have to knock into someone that hates my guts. He turned the thought over in his mind, and altered it: hates – our guts. He frowned. Now he was identifying himself with the builders of the house, making ‘we’ of ‘I’ and ‘they’. He did not like the identification. For the first time he saw the house, shadowily, not as an island, but as part of a countryside. He did not care for the implications of that, either. A damned fine thing, he thought, avoiding the issue, a damned fine thing to find myself mixed up in a lot of mouldy ancient rows just because my name happens to be Fletton. In fact, I won’t stand it. Why should I? –

A muffled but loud squawking arose in the little black tenements around him. He looked up. A man had entered the field by a gate from the opposite corner; a little man, old and rather bent, carrying a pail in each hand. He saw Fletton and Fletton saw him, and changed his course. Fletton stood up. The old man approached steadily, his eyes on the ground; the pails were obviously heavy, though he handled them easily enough. Two yards away he put them down and straightened himself.

‘That’s our Jack’s gun,’ he said. Fletton said nothing. ‘And what might you be doing in my field?’ the old man said.

‘You’re Mr Lane?’ Fletton said.

‘I am,’ the old man said. He surveyed Fletton with clear blue angry eyes. ‘Where’s Jack?’ he asked. ‘Larking about as usual, wasting his time?’

‘He went down to the farm,’ Fletton said.

The old man swung round and looked down towards the trees, then turned again deliberately. ‘By the front way, eh?’ he said. ‘You heard me: Who’re you?’

‘I know your son,’ Fletton said, holding himself in.

‘Good for nothing army muck, eh?’ the old man said. ‘What’re you doing on my land?’

‘Your land?’ Fletton said.

‘Who are you?’ the old man said, almost as if he expected the answer.

‘Fletton,’ Fletton said with a kind of triumph. ‘I’m Godfrey Fletton. Are you sure it’s your land, Mr Lane?’

‘Sure,’ the old man said, blinking. ‘Sure enough.’ He dived forward, suddenly, and Fletton, retreating in sheer surprise, lost his footing and fell sprawling. The old man stood over him with the gun in his hand. ‘Sure enough to put you off it, Mr Fletton,’ he said. ‘Get up.’

‘Don’t threaten me,’ Fletton said

‘Threaten nowt,’ the old man said. ‘Get up, and walk.’

Fletton got to his feet warily. ‘I’d put that gun down, if I were you,’ he said.

‘You would, would you?’ old Lane said. ‘Walk. Keep on walking. Get off my land.’ He shifted both triggers of the gun to full cock, click, click. His old gnarled hands trembled slightly; sweat ran down his face. They began to move up the hilly field in ridiculous procession, Fletton stepping backwards until he realized that this added the last touch of absurdity to the spectacle; then he turned his back on the old man and tried to walk unconcernedly, as though he were alone. He was not so much angry as outraged to find himself in such a position; not afraid of the gun, but of the idea of himself and the old man rolling about on the ground, struggling for it. A thing like this can’t happen, it can’t, he thought over and over again; and all the time the old man kept on talking, behind him.

‘My turn, Mister Fletton, Mr high-and-mighty,’ he said. ‘Near forty year I’ve waited for this. I’ve dreamed of it, but by God I never thought to get it. There’s no one to see, but never think they won’t hear. Forty year I’ve not held up my head in this parish – and now – praps this’ll give ’em summat else to talk about. Maybe they’ll give me a bit of peace –’

‘They may give you something else,’ Fletton said over his shoulder. ‘There’s such a thing as the Law –’

• 'Law.' The old man spat noisily. 'What's the Law to do with you? Do you know your letters? There's notices on all my fields: keep out. There's fences round 'em, and the gates are locked. Aye, locked: ready for you, or anyone else. You're trespassing, Mr Lord Fletton; you'd our lad's gun, you were stealing my eggs -'

'Now look here,' Fletton said.

'I'm looking, never fear,' the old man said. 'Over the gate now.'

Fletton climbed the gate and turned. The old man stared back at him grimly; but behind the stare was a glint of something else, something difficult to give an immediate name to, but sufficient to change the words in Fletton's mouth against his intention.

'This is an unfortunate business, Mr Lane,' he began.

'For you,' the old man said, uncompromisingly.

'I hope you won't regret it,' Fletton said.

'Thanks,' old Lane said, '- for nowt. Yon's a right of way you're standing on, Mr Fletton. I can't close it, or I would. But I warn you, it runs through my yard, and I've a dog that'd fair relish your breeches' seat.'

He stumped off down the field without another word. Fletton stood and watched him go, uncertain whether to laugh or to break into furious cursing. At last he shrugged; he was sure of one thing: that he had no desire for another serio-comic encounter in Lane's yard, this time with a dog joining in. He made his way slowly back along the foot-path by the way he had come, thinking, I'll have to go and see Ames after all. Maybe he can tell me what bee the old chap has in his bonnet.

The path was still in deep shadow, but the open field threw up a glare of light; the corn seemed to rustle in its enjoyment of the sun, thrusting upward to it, bursting with pleasure. It, and the maimed and wired hedge that enclosed it, offered the strongest possible contrast to the lush and leisurely growth of the wilderness behind the wall. And that's the explanation, Fletton thought: it's

deliberate. Lane on one side, Fletton on the other; the old devil.

He came to the stream and the stepping stones. Sitting by the wall, smoking quietly, was young Lane. He gave Fletton his wide grin and said: 'You didn't get yourself shot, then?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'Not quite. But – how did you get here?'

'I saw you and dad having your teetateet, so I did a commando up the path,' the young man said. 'You were too tied up to notice me. He found out who you were, did he?'

'He did,' Fletton said.

'I told you – he's balmy,' Jack Lane said. 'Does he know I know?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'It was damned awkward too –'

'That's all right then,' Lane said. He got to his feet, and brought a pail out of the undergrowth behind ~~him~~. 'Now look,' he said. 'There's no eggs, but there's a loaf of bread, and a piece of bacon, not very much –'

'Not much,' Fletton said. 'Enough to get you into a blazing row. I don't think I –'

The young man made a rude noise. 'I'm always in a row,' he said. 'I sneaked it out, but I'll be damned if I risk sneaking it back. Say we owe it to you –'

'Like hell I will,' Fletton said. 'You agreed to let me pay for it, at least.'

'I said the old man'd want paying,' Lane said. 'That was when he was going to know about it. Now he can't, so what? You don't want me to pocket the cash?' He grinned. 'That'd be stealing, mister. Well, so long.'

'But wait a minute,' Fletton said. 'Come and help me eat it, anyway.'

'Sorry,' Lane said. 'Can't. I'd be missed. Be seeing you.'

He flipped his hand at Fletton and started up the path. At the top he turned, with the same gesture. Fletton waved back, then crossed the stepping stones, carrying the pail.

He put the pail on the top of the wall, climbed over, and took the pail down.

Immediately he was enveloped in the odd silence of Fletton, a silence that the voluble chuckling whisper of the stream only seemed to accentuate. There was no other sound, not even of a bird singing. Like the sleeping beauty's palace, he thought, idly. She was lucky: when she woke the fairy cleaned the place up for her. I've got to do the damned job myself – and make a living out of it at the same time. I wonder. There isn't a tree worth felling: all young stuff; and no cultivable land that I've seen so far, except the field the old devil's got, and the best he could do with that was a hen run. I don't fancy hens, he thought – stupid clucking half-wits –

He passed under the bridge, and came out on the bank of the lake. The sun was over the house now, to the far side, so that the portico cast a long shadow, and the windows looked more than ever like the empty sockets of eyes. Coming back to it, he found it merely forlorn, and sighed. Well, at all events, he thought, if old Lane's a fair sample, I can certainly choose my own contacts. I don't suppose my lady will be back after the fright she got this morning. I can get down to it in peace.

He collected his towel, warm and almost dry, from the bush where he had left it, and followed the path on by the lakeside. Stepping across the branch he had fallen over, he thought: water. I was looking for water when I saw her. And since then nothing I've done was what I had in mind to do. I've got to have water up there. Maybe if the pump was primed – He slung the loaf and the bacon in his towel, and went through the bushes down to the water's edge, but the water at this point was thick with weed. He retraced his steps to the creek, where for some reason no weed gathered, and filled the pail. With the pail in one hand and his bundle in the other, he made his way back to the steps and up them, flight by flight. There were six flights, five landings; by the time he reached the top his

calf muscles were aching; my God, he thought, if that's the nearest water the place is uninhabitable.

The idea filled him with concern, so that instead of pausing at the top he hurried across the terrace, where the sun beat down on his head like a club and the flagstones threw up waves of heat that were almost visible; along the side of the house, and into the stable-yard, making straight for the pump. He put down his bundle, and lifted the pail in both hands. He tipped the water into the top of the pump. He put down the pail, took hold of the pump handle and said aloud: Now. He raised the handle; there was a distant gurgle, far down the shaft. He pressed downwards, and up again. The handle pressed back against his pressure. By God, it's there, he said. He worked the handle as though his whole future depended on it; a gush of rusty brown water came from the spout. He went on pumping, watching it with shining eyes, while the water grew gradually clearer, and the trough filled up and lipped over. Water spread round his feet and away towards the centre of the yard. He continued to work the handle with his right hand, and held his left under the spout. He brought it to his mouth: the water was cold and sweet. He stopped, and looked about the yard. He found it all very familiar. It had a look of home.

Chapter Three

IT was a new sensation, and it persisted all that day like an inner warmth. He fell asleep at dusk without the act of will that had become second nature to him, making sleep a barricade behind which his conscious self might hide while his spirit ran uneasily about in the darkness. He slept for ten hours. When he woke he lit a cigarette and lay looking up at the cobwebs among the rafters, and the chinks of light that came in between the ancient tiles; listening to the deep fluting of a wood-pigeon perched, by the sound, almost directly above his head. The sky through the little window was sunny, but the sun itself was still occluded by the bulk of the house.

He lay comfortably, seeing the long tally of past days as a weary and irksome tunnel at best dead and dull, at worst alive and full of pain: the little figure running, crawling through it Fletton indeed, but in this moment of half-dreaming having no relation to himself. It was, in fact, a thing one could laugh at, without malice, without any emotion of the heart; the whole nightmare, of which his journey to Fletton had been the culmination, seemed a dreary story, not very interesting, like the misfortunes of a stranger. Even yesterday had receded so far into the past as to have the two-dimensional quality of a legend, with himself as the dim tapestry portrait of a prince, performing impossible fairy tasks for the eventual release of some spell-bound maiden. The enchanted palace, the water-sprite, the ogre: all the ingredients of legend were there, superimposed on a kind of Robinson Crusoe adventure story – the footprints on the stone, the foraging for supplies, the finding of the spring; the old smithy, like the relic of a lost civilization; then the fire and the first meal; the soft bed of grass under the ancient trees, the embers of the fire

glowing in the forest twilight, the good smell of smoke -.

He awoke, and scrambled up, cursing and coughing. The loft was full of smoke; there was a black smouldering patch on the hay he had used for his bed, where his cigarette had fallen. He heaped more hay over the smoulder and pressed downward, to kill the fire. A subdued crackling came from under his hands. He pressed harder, then gathering the whole immediate mass into his hands, carried it to the open window and thrust it out. It drifted raggedly away, emitting desultory sparks as it fell. He turned and looked inward. A single wisp of hay was still burning on the floor; it burst into a tiny fierce flame and expired. He knelt down and winnowed the rest of his bed between his hands; there was no more fire: the hay smelt intoxicatingly sweet, like a summer meadow.

He sat back on his haunches and rubbed his scalp violently; and let his hands dangle over his knees. The watch on his wrist showed twenty-five minutes past six. Lord, he thought, I must have dropped right off again. That's what comes of smoking in bed, my son: let it be a lesson to you; smoking and dreaming, burning yourself to death.

It was half-past seven by the time he had had his swim and shaved, in cold water at the pump. He was ragingly hungry, almost hungry enough to eat the last two rashers of Lane's bacon, raw. But there was still life in the embers of the fire he had made in the smithy; he blew it up gently, the old bellows squealing and grunting. He had found a battered pail under the dogcart, and washed it out and used it as a frying-pan; he used it again now, setting it firmly on the forge, with the bacon in the bottom of it. He stood looking out into the brilliant sunlit yard, operating the bellows tenderly, so that the coke under the pail burnt red and not white; exercising his teeth on a piece of dry bread-crust and thinking of what he had to do during the day. First of all, facing him squarely, was the necessity of going

down into the village. Bread, and the other rations, matches, soap, a hatchet, an electric torch, a frying pan, kettle, teapot, some coffee – a list without end. He sandwiched his bacon between the last of the bread and ate it, frowning.

He was walking towards the pump for a drink to finish off his meal when a man came through the gate into the yard. His head appeared first, tortoise-like on the end of a long neck, and then withdrew so quickly that it might have been an apparition of delirium. Fletton stopped dead, and waited; dismay crept over him at this violation of his sanctuary which he had already come to think inviolable. The whole man sidled round the corner, a great grin surmounting a long frail body, a face so blotched and vinous it was almost blue, long yellowish teeth. He was dressed in tweeds, with a battered tweed hat, suit and hat both seeming to have been intended for someone much smaller. The hat perched rakishly on his white irreverend hair, knobby wrists protruded from his sleeves, his trousers came to an end an inch above heavy boots whose tabs stuck out behind like a parody on the wings of Hermes. Only his collar, the kind of collar the Edwardian dandy wore, three inches high and gleaming white, was big enough, and that was too big, so that he could sink his chin in it with ease. He approached, grinning; Fletton waited. He touched his hat with a fugitive gesture, and said in a high voice: 'Captain Fletton?'

Fletton nodded, his expression grim.

The man came nearer. 'Sir Godfrey?' he said. His teeth clicked distressingly.

Fletton winced. 'Godfrey Fletton,' he said. 'What do you want?'

The man's head bobbed in a kind of ecstasy; his grin was evidently meant to be ingratiating, his Adam's apple raced up and down behind his collar like a mouse in a treadmill. 'No need to ask for *your* identity card,' he said, clicking. 'I ought to, you know, but I know a

Fletton when I see one. You've a look of Master David, now. -'

'So I believe,' Fletton said. 'What do you want? Who are you?'

The grin vanished. 'Name of Durdon,' the man said with a flavour of reproach. 'Abel Durdon. And happy to be the first to welcome you, Sir Godfrey, to your ancestral home.' He was back in his stride, grin firmly re-established. 'Mrs Durdon and self -'

'For God's sake,' Fletton shouted. 'What do you want?' He was sorry immediately; the man was painfully surprised; he took a convulsive sidling step, sideways and backwards, making a patent effort to arrange his face in a business-like mask; he trembled a little.

'Greatly regret,' he said, and now his teeth clicked like castanets. 'This intrusion - as it must seem - a matter of business -' His hands were working incessantly, patting each pocket in succession, trembling; they even patted his hat, which he took off, as if in a gesture of belated and propitiatory respect, so that his white hair stood up wispily and rather pathetically in the sun.

'Look,' Fletton said. 'I'm sorry -'

'My fault, my fault entirely,' Durdon said, patting away. 'Should have said before - a letter: where is it? - somewhere -'

'A letter for me?' Fletton said.

'Yes,' Durdon said, 'that's right: Captain Sir Godfrey Fletton - and registered too; so I thought, I'll take it first off: you never know, I said to Mabel, it may be important - ah,' it was a cry of triumph, 'here: yes, here it is.'

Fletton took it from him without looking at it, intent on making amends. 'It's most kind of you,' he began.

Durdon shook his head in disclaimer, a rapid movement that he seemed unable to stop, once it had begun. 'Go on, read it,' he said. 'I expect it's bound to be important - and you have to sign, you know -' He began fumbling in his pockets again.

‘It’s not as important as all that,’ Fletton said. ‘I had no right to shout at you as I did, especially when you were doing me a kindness –’

‘No, no,’ Durdon said. ‘Dear me, no – I do it every day – where’s that pencil? –’

‘I owe you an apology,’ Fletton said firmly.

‘Oh, no,’ Durdon said. ‘You mustn’t, really.’ He put his hat back, using both hands, with a coy air like a young girl. Between his hands, the grin seemed to be re-establishing itself; he dropped the pencil, and bent to pick it up. As he rose, the grin spread to its previous proportions, with the coyness added. ‘Mabel,’ he said. ‘Mrs Durdon, you understand – keeps the post office in Fletton. I take the letters round’ – he tittered – ‘postman, you know – in an amateur way.’

‘Well,’ Fletton said. ‘I hope you don’t have so far to walk with every letter.’ He signed the receipt, holding it against the pump.

‘That’s very thoughtful of you, Sir Godfrey,’ Durdon said. ‘Very. As a matter of fact I had my bike, my trusty steed, as I always call it. Thankee, thankee.’ He took the receipt and his pencil.

‘You rode?’ Fletton said incredulously. ‘Up the drive?’ He had a lively memory of the vegetation against his legs in the darkness.

‘Oh no,’ Durdon said. ‘I couldn’t ride it – I carried it.’ He tittered again, explosively, behind his hand. ‘Daft, wasn’t it? But I didn’t know: I’ve never been up the drive before, even in the old days. They always used to take the letters at the lodge.’

‘You knew the place in its heyday?’ Fletton said, and began to walk towards the gate.

The old man followed, with his odd skipping sideways step. ‘I wouldn’t go so far as that,’ he said. ‘I only came here in twenty-two: eleven years after they closed the Folly, that was.’

‘It was seedy even then, eh?’ Fletton said.

'Seedy,' Durdon said, tittering. 'That's a good one, that's ~~very~~ good. You and your jokes, Sir Godfrey.'

'Please,' Fletton said. 'Don't keep calling me Sir Godfrey. I'm not used to it, and I don't like it. Call me – call me what you like, but cut that out.' He was conscious of the old man looking at him with his mouth wide open. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm – oh, forget it. We were talking about the Hall. It was going downhill even then, was it?'

They came round the corner on to the terrace. 'It was beautiful,' the old man said unexpectedly. 'It still is. But sad: yes, very sad.'

'Sad?' Fletton said.

'Sad to see it left so,' Durdon said, and to Fletton's intense embarrassment, the old man caught him by the hand. His touch was cold and scaly, his yellow clicking teeth repulsive, but in spite of his grin, he was so obviously in earnest that it was impossible to draw away. 'I'm an old man, Sir Godfrey,' he said rapidly. 'You're young. You've got your life in front of you. You ought to do something: I said to Mabel this morning, when I saw the letter, Mabel, I said, look at this, it's true then there's a Fletton back at the Hall, now maybe something'll get done. And she said, you old fool – that's the way she talks, you have to know her – you old fool, she said, you keep your mouth shut.' He dropped Fletton's hand, and looked away. 'But I never can, never could.' He wiped his nose with his knuckles, childishly.

Fletton said gently: 'I don't think I'm quite with you, Mr Durdon. What is it you think I ought to do?'

'It's none of my business,' Durdon said. 'Mabel was right. I'd best keep my mouth shut.'

'But you haven't said anything,' Fletton began.

'That's right,' the old man said, brightening, 'I haven't, have I? You've got to be up early to catch me.' He tapped the side of his nose with a knobby finger, shaking his head and tittering. 'And I've my round to do, so I'll be off. It's been a real treat to talk to you, Sir Godfrey.'

. He skipped over to the portico, and seized the bicycle leaning incongruously against the steps. There was a brief thrashing moment of conflict with the machine, through which his grin shone and from which he emerged miraculously poised on the back step, in the old-fashioned mode of mounting. Fletton came out of his surprise at this sudden retreat.

‘Here,’ he said sharply. ‘Wait a minute.’

The old man waited, looking round like an ungainly bird, caught in the act of flight.

‘You said I’d a look of David,’ Fletton said. ‘Did you know David?’

‘Oh yes,’ Durdon said, grinning. ‘I used to see him about when he was a nipper.’ His look exuded an enormous slyness.

‘If that was all you saw of him,’ Fletton said, ‘how do you know –’

‘Family likeness, Sir Godfrey,’ Durdon said. His teeth clicked triumphantly. ‘Family likeness – can’t mistake it.’

He hopped on to the bike and wavered off down the steep incline of the drive. Where the flagstones ended, and the grass and weeds began, the bicycle paused, balanced perilously for a long moment, then toppled slowly over sideways like a tall tree falling. The old man landed on one foot, let the bicycle lie and began to lope back towards Fletton. He stopped and called upwards, right leg advanced, in the exact attitude of a child daring another to chase it: ‘Sir Godfrey.’

‘What is it?’ Fletton said.

‘I forgot to mention,’ the old man called. ‘Might be useful to you. I do a bit of cobbling in my spare time, in an amateur way, you know. If you’ve any shoes – don’t forget: Abel Durdon. The Post Office.’ He waved a hand, retreated again, picked up the bicycle, and carrying it awkwardly disappeared round the corner, into the trees.

Fletton walked back to the yard, smiling at first: the old man had something likeable about him, in spite of his

rather repellent personal characteristics. All the same he found it disturbing, this assumption that merely because his name was Fletton he should 'do something'; just as old Lane's assumption that for the same reason he should immediately take responsibility for an ancient quarrel, had been disturbing. His smile faded. He looked at the letter he still held in his hand: 'Captain Sir Godfrey Fletton, Bt.' Standing by the pump, frowning, he opened the letter. Disapproval seemed to surge up at him out of the envelope, like an evil genie emerging smokily from a bottle; disapproval crystallized in the prim old-fashioned letter heading, and found direct expression in the letter itself. Reading it, he dismissed the two old men as rural eccentrics who might be amusing if one had time to be amused, and concentrated his irritation on Sydney Thackel, who wrote:

Dear Sir,

re Fletton

We had been under the impression that you were calling to see us last Wednesday afternoon, in view of the considerable number of matters still to be cleared up in regard to the Estate. We now understand, however, on application to your address at Camberwell, that you have left London, and must therefore assume, in the absence of information to the contrary, that you have gone to Fletton, where we trust this letter will reach you in due course.

Under the circumstances, we suggest that you communicate with our Mr Andrew Thwaite in Corby, to whom we are sending the relevant papers. We would again stress that it is very much in your interest to ensure that all details appertaining to your inheritance are clear and sound in law; and not only in your interest but in the future interest of your possible issue.

Yours faithfully

Thwaite Thackel and Thwaite.

Damn his eyes, Fletton thought savagely, damned

supercilious legal ass; and heard again Mr Sydney's flat dry voice, droning interminably in interview after interview: probing, reproving, above all disapproving of this upstart from Camberwell, whose family his family had served for a hundred and twenty years. I told him I didn't want to use the title, he thought, as though he cared a damn about me and what I want, or about anything but the lousy estate. The Estate! A bloody ruin, and I'm living in it, and that's enough. And as for their Mr Andrew, he can fry in hell for me.

He crumpled the letter and shoved it into his trousers pocket, climbed the ladder to his attic bedroom, and put on his jacket and a cap. Coming down again, he found the day overcast, but could not recall the sun's going; whether it was during his talk with Durdon, or while he had been reading the letter, or just now. The sky had a grey, all-day look about it, that decided him to take his raincoat; and that involved going through the house. Except to retrieve his spongebag from the scullery he had not been in it since the previous morning; although this was not from any conscious reluctance, although he did not recognize the fact even now, he found in his bad temper a support for his nerves, and fostered it. He walked through the servants' quarters muttering again: supercilious ass, blast him; glancing disdainfully around him, expressing in every step a contempt that was wonderfully comforting.

To this mood the house looked dull, dusty; it had none of the heavy menace of the day before, but seemed more like the empty shell of an obsolete public monument, jejune and boring. Inside the door leading to the hall, where the lateral corridor bisected the building, he paused and looked incuriously about. To the left, there were doors on either side of the passage; to the right, doors to the rear only, but in the front wall of the corridor, which he recognized as the inside wall of the great room on whose floor he had spent his first night in Fletton, there appeared the threatening crack that marred the room itself. Here it

seemed even wider: he forgot his temper and walked a few paces along the corridor to look more closely at it: it ran down the wall to the floorboards, and at the top made its way across the ceiling, disappearing over one of the doors in the rear wall. He looked in through the door, into a room with no windows but with a roof nearly all glass: the crack continued across the glass, a jagged opening to the sky, reflected on the floor, like a shadow, in a twin line of damp and bird-droppings.

He shook his head, wonderingly, and went back into the corridor, then through the connecting door into the main hall. In the great room – the drawing-room, he found himself calling it – a trail of oddments led over to his bag, as he had left them, giving an impression of disordered flight. The impression did not reach his mind; he picked the things up, absently, and dropped them back into the bag, thinking all the time of the implications of the crack, glaring down at him from the white ceiling. He took his coat from the back of the chair where he had thrown it, and put it on. In the outer wall of the house, the crack was not very noticeable; it followed the jamb of one of the windows. He drew his flask from the raincoat pocket, and shook it, holding it close to his ear: it was about half full. He put it down on the mantel, counting the windows. There were seven; the crack coincided with the third from the door.

He went outside, turned right under the portico; down the steps, and looked up at the window again. The crack ascended the façade up to the cornice; and my God, he thought, here it is under my feet. He traced it across the terrace; the balustrade was split too; he leaned over and looked downwards towards the lake, but under the thick and waving grass on the escarpment nothing was visible. He raised his eyes, and saw at the end of the vista the skeleton outline of the pithead gear; and thought again, my God, so that's what Thackel was talking about. It's just as if the whole house had begun to break in two.

. He began to walk along the terrace, trying to remember what Mr Sydney had said. He had hardly listened, he had resented being pinned in a chair and subjected to a kind of rambling and verbose history lesson, delivered in a flat monotone and with a superior air by the egregious Thackel. His mind had wandered; there was a lordly plane tree in the square outside the office window whose branches were a metropolis of small birds: periodically, as if at a signal, the whole arboreal population would rise shouting into the air, circle the tree, and alight again. He had watched them with envy, while Mr Sydney had waded laboriously through the industrial revolution and the age of steam; pinpointing his sterile facts by references to Sir Godfrey ('the second Sir Godfrey, you understand') and Sir Godfrey and Sir Godfrey – a whole line of Godfrey Flettons each one more dusty than the last.

The key word was folly: folly had conceived the mine and folly worked it. Even now Mr Sydney's voice, talking of it, took on a tone of peevish remonstrance that must have been inherited from his father or from some vanished Thwaite. The devil had taken the then Sir Godfrey to the bottom of the main shaft and there shown him the kingdoms under the earth and the riches thereof, and the sight had blinded him to all reason. The project had developed in an atmosphere of argument and counter-argument; the seam had been poor and wayward; water had always been present, and water had eventually trapped and killed eleven men. That was the end; but meanwhile the Fletton fortune had poured quickly and quietly, and just as fatally as the water, into the great hole in the ground, leaving the house as Fletton, standing on the bridge above the stream, now saw it, cold and empty and cracked irremediably across its centre.

Under the new grey sky the timeless calm of yesterday was metamorphosed into the loneliness of neglected age; surrounded by blowsy and untended trees, the house looked squalid, the water at its foot green and scummy like a

disused drain. Leaning on the parapet of the bridge, Fletton thought bitterly: now I'm seeing it as it really is; this is my inheritance that that crazy old fool thought I ought to 'do something about'. As though everything that could be done wasn't done, as though every last drop of life hadn't been successfully squeezed out of it, before I was born. I knew it, anyway; I knew it before I came: what am I bellyaching about? Just because I'm unbalanced enough to be doped by a day's sunshine and a night's sleep, I've no kick coming. I ought to write dear Sydney a letter of thanks for bringing me back to earth.

He left the bridge and launched himself again into the ragged tangle of weeds that was the drive. His own path on Saturday, and Durdon's that morning, were clearly marked; but like an ill-tempered child he ignored them and thrust straight through, pushing aside and trampling flat loosestrife and golden-rod, burdock and dandelion and all the anonymous bystanders of their tribe. As he came near the lodge he heard children's voices; the children, who had ventured through the open gates no further than the lodge steps, did not see him until he was right on them. Then a sudden silence came down; he stood and looked at them, while they looked at their feet, or at the sky, anywhere but back at him, paralysed with embarrassment. Oh, what the hell, he thought: what's the use. As he moved, a tremor ran across the group: he went out through the gate without speaking, and felt the tension break behind him. They flowed after him, to the gates, and stood watching him from behind the bars. His restraint had impressed them more than anything he could have said; one by one they edged out into the square: two little girls even tried to close the gates, but they were too heavy.

He did not look round, but went on diagonally across the square. It was empty: the fair had gone; the church clock, roman numerals in tarnished gilt on a black face, made it ten minutes past nine. He took in the village with more interest than he showed, or admitted to himself, identifying

the road by which he had come in on the Saturday night; in the side opposite, the Fletton Arms, George Ames, grey stone and dirty brown paint, with three small flat-faced cottages on either hand; facing the lodge gates, the church, so big as to be out of proportion, and the steps on which he had sat down. At the top of the steps and to the left of the church porch was a small door, set in the wall and leading evidently by way of the churchyard to the Vicarage, a great block of stone, filling the rest of that side of the square. He nodded to himself: that was the door from which the girl and the man had come: vicarage people, possibly.

The fourth side was the most stylish: there were two moderately good Georgian houses with pleasant sash-windows and well-proportioned doors, each with a little flight of steps leading up to it; and one Edwardian villa-type house; the rest were cottages of the same vintage as those flanking the Fletton Arms; with the exception of another public house, larger, on the south-east corner, behind him and to his right. The villa bore the ugly enamelled-iron sign of a post office over its front door, and had a clock and a list of posting times in its bay window; there was a pillar-box and a telephone-booth on the pavement before it. One of the cottages was a shop; one of the Georgian houses a branch-bank, open Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The sky and the cobbles were the same drab grey: there was no colour anywhere, except for the red of the pillar-box, newly painted.

He came to a halt outside the shop, which claimed the dignity of a General Stores, James Gribble prop., licensed to sell tobacco; and stood looking in the window. This had been slightly enlarged at some past date; behind the fly-blown glass were six tins of Fry's cocoa, pyramid fashion, three, two, and one; a warped show-card: Join the Mustard Club; and a row of glass bottles containing unnamed and uninviting sweets. He fingered the ration book in his pocket, and felt his heart thumping ridiculously, like a schoolboy's, hesitating outside the headmaster's study. You

bloody fool, he thought contemptuously: what's the matter with you? You got over this business with doors months ago. He had, in fact, been telling himself so for months, every time it was necessary to summon up all his fortitude to put his hand to a door handle, and turn it. If he forgot, if his mind was on other things, he would walk straight up to a door and through; when he remembered, this happened: this sickening, heartrending, deathly irresolution; and then he would think, you bloody fool, you bloody bloody fool, just as he was thinking now.

There was a stealthy movement beside him. The children, following him across the square, had come up on either hand and now stood with him, gazing earnestly and silently into the window. They did not so much as glance at him, they steadfastly ignored him; it was pure accident that they and he happened to be interested in the same window at the same time; but looking down at their heads, fair hair and dark, long and short, he knew that they were acutely, animal-like, aware of him, watching him through the pores of their skins. To his strung nerves it was the last straw, as though they were mocking him deliberately; he made one of his sudden uncontrollable movements, sideways to the door. The children scattered; a little boy fell and raised a piercing howl. He opened the door and burst into the darkness of the shop, setting off a bell that whirred irritably and would not stop. He closed the door and cut down the howl to a whimper; a voice said softly: 'Good morning, Sir Godfrey.'

He whipped round; the bell went on ringing. A small man behind the cluttered counter seemed to bow and smile, holding his hands together at his chest. 'Step off the mat,' he said. He leaned forward across the counter, pointing at Fletton's feet. 'The mat,' he repeated. 'If you'll just step forward -' and as Fletton moved like an automaton: 'Aye, that's it,' he said. The bell stopped. 'It's electric,' he said explanatorily, in a voice as smooth and flat as farm-butter. 'I'm a great one for gadgets: every-

thing up to the minute, like.' Without the least pause he waved his arm violently in the air and bellowed: 'Away wi' thee. Go on. Off now.'

Fletton looked round involuntarily; the children outside the door did not move; their heads, an irregular row of spheres as featureless in silhouette as cannon-balls, remained close to the glass, silent and absorbed.

'Brats,' the man said viciously. 'And 'ow are you, Sir Godfrey?' His manner to Fletton was unpleasantly obsequious; a gold tooth gleamed from the darkness behind the counter.

'I'm —' Fletton began; and thought no, I'm damned if I'll be trapped into this. 'How do you know who I am?' he said shortly.

The tooth flashed again. 'Talk,' the man said. 'You know 'ow it is. Clatter clatter You can't 'elp 'earing. "There's a new Sir Godfrey back at the 'All." Then you come in: I could tell in a minute. We don't get many foreigners 'ere. But any'ow, I'd been expecting you, Sir Godfrey.'

'Oh,' Fletton said. 'You had?' He found himself disliking Mr Gribble more each moment. 'Why?'

'Well,' Gribble said. 'The Flettons were always great for local trade. A grand family, Sir Godfrey.' He cleared his throat and smirked. 'And then again,' he said slyly. 'There's nowhere else to go.'

'Isn't there?' Fletton said.

'Not nearer than Stewbury,' the grocer said. 'And they don't deliver, since the war. If I could 'ave your ration book, Sir Godfrey?' He held out a hand.

Fletton hesitated. The man's oily assurance, his obsequious insolence, made him feel sick. Then he thought oh, what's the use, I shan't be hobnobbing with the brute. What's the good of getting off on the wrong foot? He handed over the ration book. The grocer switched on a light above the counter, and revealed himself as an undersized bald-headed man, with a fringe of grey or dirty

white hair over his collar, grey sidewhiskers by each ear, and, incongruously, a moustache, much darker, waxed into brisk sergeant-major points. His shirt-sleeves were rolled half-way up skinny forearms, a dirty white apron encircled his middle.

'You 'aven't an emergency card, Sir Godfrey?' he said, looking up.

'No,' Fletton said.

'You'll 'ave to re-register then,' Gribble said.

'Shall I?' Fletton said indifferently.

'I'm afraid it can't be 'elped,' Gribble said. 'Means going to Stewbury to do it, too. Lot of blasted red-tape, but there it is: can't be 'elped, as I say. And what about Lady Fletton, Sir Godfrey?'

Fletton stared: the question baffled him. 'Lady Fletton?' he said.

'Your lady wife,' Gribble said, with a kind of rich unctuousness.

Why, damn your impudence, Fletton thought; he bit back the words and said curtly: 'There's no Lady Fletton.'

'Oh,' Gribble said. He seemed to digest this, and then said: 'You won't be opening up the 'All, then?'

'I'll be living there,' Fletton said. 'If that's what you mean.'

'No,' the man said, 'it wasn't – not exactly. Still –' he brought out his buttery golden smile – 'I think we can serve you to your satisfaction, Sir Godfrey.'

'All right,' Fletton said. He picked up the ration book from under the grocer's hand, and turned. His nerves were beginning to quiver again: he had to get out of the shop.

'You'll let me 'ave that back?' Gribble said. 'I'll 'ave all the things done up for you this afternoon. And of course you'll want tea –'

'Yes, yes,' Fletton said. 'And other things too – kettle, frying pan – I'll give you a list –'

'That's very kind of you,' Gribble said. 'We stock owt, in

reason. And I'm sure we'll always do our best to deserve your favours, Sir Godfrey.'

'Look,' Fletton said. 'Let the Sir Godfrey stuff go, will you? Take it as read. And I'm not doing you any favours – get that too.'

'Very good, Sir Godfrey,' the man said submissively. 'It's a manner of speaking, like –'

'Right,' Fletton said. He made for the door, and saw again the row of little cannon-balls, immovable, outside it. 'O God,' he thought. He stopped. 'I say: Could you let me have some sweets – now?'

'Eh, it's a pleasure, Sir Godfrey,' Gribble said. 'I can tek your personal points any time.' He took back the ration book. 'You've got six ounces 'ere,' he said. 'Now what will you 'ave – fruit drops, caramels, chocolates –?'

'Fruit drops,' Fletton said. 'Give me the lot in fruit drops – and hurry.'

'I will that,' Gribble said. He cut the coupons from the book, taking his time, and proceeded to weigh out the sweets, talking. 'There's a bus to Stewbury five to ten, if you want it,' he said. 'Stops opposite the church. Every two hours, they are. And don't forget to register for meat and milk, while you're at it. Meat'll be Jukes – he's down the Spurling Road, round to the right when you go out. You'll want to watch Sam Jukes – he'll do you down if you give him 'alf a chance, but you've no choice. Milk – Mr Lane at Dimfold – he does the only round there is –'

He handed over the packet of sweets, and the book.

'Thanks,' Fletton said, cutting him short. 'Charge them with the other things, will you? And thanks for the information – I'll remember. Morning.' He flung himself at the door.

''Ere,' Gribble called after him. 'Don't go registering with Lane for eggs. I can do you them –'

Fletton stood on the step, blinking in the grey light. It had begun to rain: the cobbles in the square shone with a kind of snailish iridescence. The children had fallen back into

a half circle, watching him. The face of the smallest was extravagantly smudged with tears; his nose was running unregarded. He had fair hair cropped close to his scalp, except at the front where a fringe stuck straight out like the peak of a cap; grey eyes looked out from under the peak; he sucked a dirty thumb. He was probably five years old. Fletton held out the bag of sweets.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘here’s some sweets.’

The little boy sucked his thumb, staring steadily. A girl, next to him, slightly bigger, nudged him. He staggered minutely, but otherwise did not move. ‘Go on,’ the girl said in a hissing whisper, ‘tek ’em.’ He made no sign. Fletton lost patience. ‘You give them to him,’ he said to the girl. He gave her the bag, pushed through the children, and walked over towards the church. Behind him the girl scolded her smaller brother. ‘Our Willie,’ she said, ‘where’s your manners? You say ta to the gentleman. I’ll tell your mother on you: I will. Say ta, you little sod –’

His head was aching; he was already tired of people. It was twenty-five minutes past nine: half an hour to wait for the bus. He went into the church. It seemed lighter in there than outside; big and airy, but cold. The windows were all plain glass except the one over the altar, which was in the worst style of Victorian stained: jammy reds and barley-sugar yellows. The walls were washed white, the coconut matting on the floor old and worn. There were flowers on the offertory table, roses and sweet peas; a man was moving quietly about the choir stalls. Fletton sat down in a pew at the back and put his head in his hands. After a time the man went out.

The bus reached Stewbury at a quarter past ten. He inquired of a policeman for the Food Office, and found it housed up two flights of stairs in a back street, above the den of the Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. He sat for an interminable time on a wooden bench, while a girl with a synthetic Bowery accent, a penchant for chewing

gum, and no other interest, toyed with his ration book and his identity card. At regular short intervals she examined her face minutely but impersonally in a hand-mirror. Once she went out and was gone for twenty-three minutes. She handed him his papers, complete, at half-past eleven; he had registered with Lane of Dimfold for milk after a spiritless objection: 'ain't no choice, see?' the young lady said languidly chewing.

When he left the office, it was raining hard. He stood on the bridge over the river, the rain cascading from his hat-brim, looking down at the muddy water; to his right, on a slight eminence, the sole remaining tower of the castle keep looked down at him across the clustering roofs of the town. A policeman, the same that he had seen earlier, came by, waterproofed and immensely tall.

'Get fixed up?' he asked friendly.

Fletton nodded his thanks. Was there anywhere he could get lunch? he asked. The policeman seemed to doubt it. 'There's the George,' he said, but there was no hope in his tone. 'You don't want to go to the Roxy café: bits and pieces they give you there – spaghetti and such. Or there's the Misses Routledges' Cosy Corner in William Street. A bit starchy they are. No, I should try the George. They usually have beer.' Fletton thanked him again; he burrowed hugely under his cape and brought out a silver watch that looked big even in his great hand. 'You'll get nowt till half-past twelve,' he said warningly; he showed Fletton the watch face. 'That's an hour, near enough.'

'I'll look round for a bit,' Fletton said. They parted; Fletton crossed the bridge and turned the corner into the main street. He passed the Roxy, which was a cinema with a glaring front of black glass and chromium, and came to a shop whose window was full of wireless sets, electric fires, lampshades, and light fittings. He remembered he wanted an electric torch, and went in, thinking: now this time I'm O.K., no trouble at all. Why? Because I'm anonymous

here, I suppose. If I could always be like this, if I could lose myself completely –

A man came from the back of the shop, young and with a sallow skin. Fletton asked for a torch; the young man began to lay them out on a glass counter. As he did so: 'Just out?' he asked. Fletton said he was, and waited for the next question. 'What lot?' the young man said. Fletton told him, explaining; the young man nodded sympathetically. 'Missed all the fun, eh?' he said. 'Did you get that? Fun. I finished up in Burma. used to lie awake, nights, thinking about this ' He waved a hand at his stock. 'And here we are. You and me and a lot of bloody electric torches. Makes no sense, does it? That one do you?'

Fletton said it would. He paid for the torch, and left, continuing up the street. Down a side turning he saw a hanging sign: The Cozie Corner; he went on. The George, when he reached it, was a fine old inn, with an archway in under the first floor, leading to a great yard, in the centre of which an angry wet man was trying to start a baby car. Fletton went through a door in the side of the arch into a dark shabby lobby, smelling stalely of tobacco smoke. There was an office, with a counter and a glass window; the office was empty. He leaned on the counter and waited: after some minutes he took off his coat and hat and hung them on a hatstand where they could drip into a tin tray. While he was doing this a woman came into the office, sat down at the desk, and began to write in a ledger. He went back to the counter, looking in through the window. The woman looked up; she did not speak.

'Some lunch?' he began

'We don't serve before twelve forty-five,' she said snappily.

'I know,' he began again, 'but –'

'Oh well, if you like to wait,' she said, as if she despised him. She got up and crossed to the window. 'Tom,' she called, and again, 'Tom, where the devil are you?'

Tom came down the passage, an old man with sagging

trousers, threadbare dress waistcoat, and a starched shirt, incredibly dirty. He had a dirty towel in his hand.

'Why don't you put your coat on before you come out?' she said. 'Gentleman wants lunch.' And before he could speak: 'He'll wait. Put him in the snug.' She returned to the desk, ignoring Fletton.

'This way, sir,' the old man said. He led the way down a passage with peeling plaster walls, half obstructed by chairs piled one on top of the other; through another door into a small room filled with wooden tables, clothless and miserable. A window at the far end looked on to the yard, where the man still wrestled with his tiny car in a waste of cobbles. Fletton sat at the table in the window. 'I'll be laying the tables in a minute,' the old man said. Fletton shivered.

'Any chance of a cup of coffee?' he said. 'While I'm waiting?'

'No coffee after eleven,' the old man said, at the door. 'Fetch you a glass of beer, if you'd fancy one.'

'All right,' he said. 'Or no - a whisky. A double.'

The old man went out. Fletton waited. There was no sound, but he could see the curves on the man's lips as he fought his car, outside; most of the time it was possible to read them quite accurately. After a quarter of an hour Fletton said loudly, to the empty room: 'Damn me to everlasting hell.' He got up, overturning his chair, and marched out, along the passage, into the lobby. As he was putting on his coat the woman looked out of her office and said: 'Well?'

'Fine,' he said. 'Fine, fine.'

He went out into the rain. At the Cozie Corner in William Street he had a good lunch: stewed steak and dumplings, apple tart; cooked by one Miss Routledge and served by the other. They were special portions he got because the Miss Routledge serving thought he looked peaky; but he did not know this. She was a severe upright spinster whom he did not like to tip; in any case he was so

choked with rage from his treatment at the George that he ate the food almost without chewing it.

He waited an hour and a half for his bus, most of the time in a public reading-room; and arrived back in Fletton at twenty past three, feeling sick and rather ill.

It was still raining, insistently. He turned up his coat-collar and went across to the grocer's shop. He had the impression that Mr Gribble had been waiting for him, tucked away behind the counter, all day, ever since he had closed the door. The gold tooth shone out in welcome like a light in a window; the grocer checked through the ration book, saying: 'Good, good,' to each item, in a tone of pleased surprise.

'Aye, that's the lot,' he said. 'And I've it all 'ere ready.' He began to produce a series of little packages from some recess under the counter. 'If you don't want to tek 'em with you, Sir Godfrey, my girl'll bring 'em up, when she's done -'

'I'll take them,' Fletton said abruptly.

'Then in that case I'd best wrap 'em,' Gribble said. He disappeared downward as if through a trap-door, then popped back into sight with a fragment of dirty brown paper in his hand. 'There's just one thing -'

'There's a number of things,' Fletton said. 'If you've got them. I want a kettle -'

'Aye,' Gribble murmured. 'You mentioned it.'

'- and a frying-pan; a hatchet; a saucepan, I expect; some matches -' He paused, trying to see, through his headache, a picture of his life as it would be, in the details of living.

'I've all them,' the grocer said. 'Then there's a teapot, 'appen, and a cup and saucer; and a few cigarettes, eh? - and if you'd like a morning paper my girl'll bring that up too -'

Fletton felt mockery in the helpful words, implicit, completely hidden; he could not bear it, nor cope with it.

'That's the general idea,' he said, with an attempt at briskness: 'Look, suppose I leave it to you to send what you think?'

'You won't go wrong,' the man said. 'And I was saying: there's just one other thing: if there's any little extra: well, if you should 'appen to run short of a sup of tea or a dab of butter —'

'I don't get you,' Fletton said.

'Well,' Gribble said. 'I can always do a bit extra, you know. If you should 'appen to be short like. Mind you, I 'ave to pay for it —'

The door opened, the bell whirred. A man came in, a raincoat draped over his head: Fletton ignored him, in a blind quick rage. 'If you mean —' he began loudly.

'I mean I'm always glad to be of any 'elp I can, Sir Godfrey,' the grocer said. He shone his tooth at the newcomer: 'Good afternoon, Mr Barnes.'

'Afternoon, Mr Gribble,' Barnes said; and to Fletton: 'I say, do please forgive me, but I couldn't help overhearing — you're Godfrey Fletton.'

Fletton said to the grocer: 'Let's have it clear, I want my rations, and I don't want —'

'Mr Barnes, Sir Godfrey,' Gribble said. He leaned forward over the counter. 'The Reverend Mr Barnes, our rector.' Fletton realized the other man's presence for the first time, and turned in confusion. 'I'm sorry,' he began.

'My fault entirely,' the Rector said. 'Barging in. It was just — I'm delighted to meet you, my dear fellow. Delighted, really.' He stuck a hand out of the raincoat. 'I'm going to carry you off: yes, I am; no denials. Tea will just be ready, over the way.'

He shook Fletton's hand vigorously, while Gribble looked on with an air of satisfied proprietorship, as if their meeting was his arrangement and his property. Fletton said feebly that he was just on his way home; the Rector brushed this aside. 'Nonsense, nonsense,' he said. 'Be charitable, my dear chap: let us show what little hospitality

we can in these lean days.' He took Fletton's arm. 'My tobacco, Mr Gribble?' he said to the grocer. 'Two and elevenpence. Thank you so much.' He put the money on the counter, took the tobacco, and began to propel Fletton from the shop.

'I'll send the girl up with the things, then, Sir Godfrey,' Gribble called after them. 'And the account: monthly, if that'll suit -?'

'Right,' Fletton said. 'Fine. Thanks.' His head was spinning; he found himself out in the darkening rain, the little man under the coat talking confidentially by his side. 'What a pity, what a pity,' he was saying. 'I did hope to be in time to warn you not to open an account with that man.'

'What man?' Fletton said dazedly.

'Our friend Mr Gribble,' the Rector said. 'And you must forgive me, my dear fellow, for the unceremonious way I whisked you out of the shop. Not even knowing whether you'd finished your business. But I could see a row brewing, the minute I came in, and I thought, you really must be warned. Ah, here we are.'

He opened the rectory gate, pushed Fletton through, passed him, and preceded him across a narrow strip of flagstones. Two steps led up to the door; he stood on the top one feeling for his key, talking down at Fletton.

'I like my fellow mortals, Sir Godfrey; I find it difficult to think ill of them. But really, that man: an ugly customer if ever there was one. Oh, ugly. If ever my daughter -'

He got the door open, with a sigh of satisfaction.

'That's it. Now come in, my dear chap, and take off those wet things. Hang them there. Good, good.'

He had an eager, terrier-like face, faded red hair.

'And now, in here.'

The door opened into a high dusky room. A fire at the end slid warm fingers across the walls and floor, chairs covered with flowery print, washed nearly white.

'Sit there, my boy. And excuse me just one second. I'll

tell Harry.' He paused at the door. 'I was saying: if ever my daughter catches anyone out in a mean action, she says, now then, no gribbling' He gave a little yelp of laughter. 'Don't gribble, she says. Wrong, but dear me, very apt.' He went out, shutting the door.

Fletton, leaning back, let his eyes close. The chair was deep and soft, comfortable.

Chapter Four



WHEN someone came in, he opened his eyes with an effort, reluctantly polite. A grave girl was standing behind a tea-trolley, looking at him. Her pale gold hair flickered in the firelight like a fire itself 'Hallo,' she said.

He pulled himself to his feet and said foolishly: 'Hallo.'

'I'm Harriet Barnes,' she said. 'And you're Godfrey Fletton No wonder I thought you were David.'

'I'm not the Godfrey you –' he began.

'I know that,' she said. 'Why didn't you say who you were?'

'I wasn't drunk,' he said hastily. She laughed.

'That you'll have to prove,' she said. 'There was whisky in the air'

'Oh, but –' he said, and the Rector bustled in.

'What,' he said. 'Cross-examining you already? You mustn't let her, my dear fellow: face it out, or she'll be at it all the time.'

'Don't be absurd, father,' she said calmly.

'Lamentable,' the Rector said. 'The lack of respect the younger generation –' he broke off. 'I say, do you know each other, then?'

'We have met,' Harriet said. She took the cosy from a silver teapot and put it on the floor by the trolley.

'Well, that's splendid,' the Rector said. He pushed a chair forward. 'Sit down, sit down, dear boy,' he said. 'Why don't you let him sit down, Harry?' He sat down himself; Fletton sat too. 'And why didn't you tell me before?'

'I didn't know then,' she said. 'I was misled by appearances.' She began to pour the tea.

'Oh,' the Rector said. He looked from one to the other. 'Well –'

'Miss Barnes thought I was drunk,' Fletton said.

'Really?' the Rector said. 'Were you?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'But -'

'In my experience,' the Rector said, 'that's a thing one should never try to explain -'

'Your experience,' his daughter said. 'Milk, Sir Godfrey? Sugar?'

'Please,' Fletton said. 'And please -'

'You think I've never looked upon red wine?' the Rector said. 'I could tell you tales -'

'I was not drunk,' Fletton said loudly. The fire crackled in the following silence. 'I'm sorry,' he said, almost inaudibly. He looked up and took the tea the girl offered him. 'I - I'd been travelling all day - nothing to eat. I had a whisky in the pub -'

'Ah,' the Rector said. 'The Harvesters?'

'No, the other,' Fletton said. 'I - I'm sorry I shouted. I wanted you to know.'

'My dear boy,' the Rector said.

'You got whisky out of George Ames?' Harriet said. 'You must have made a hit.'

'A great character,' the Rector said. 'British oak, gnarled and strong.'

'Father,' Harriet said warningly.

'She calls me sentimental,' the Rector said. 'Because I give good things their true names.'

'Because you're sentimental,' his daughter said. 'You make me feel quite sick. Toast, Sir Godfrey?'

'No, thanks,' Fletton said. 'And please: don't call me Sir Godfrey. I'm Godfrey Fletton. The handle doesn't - I don't like it.'

'You'll have to get used to it all the same,' the Rector said.

'I don't like it,' Fletton said stubbornly. 'It doesn't belong to me.'

'But maybe you belong to it,' the Rector said. 'Like heavenly grace. It descends upon you.'

'No,' Fletton said. 'As it is I feel all the time I ought to be apologizing, and that makes it worse.'

'Apologizing?' the Rector said. 'What on earth for?

'For not being – the real Godfrey,' Fletton said. 'The one I ought to be – the one you knew.'

'My dear boy,' he said, distressed. 'You mustn't think things like that. You mustn't really. It's not – it's not kind.'

'It's stupid,' Harriet said. 'We haven't seen – Godfrey – for years. Or David since he was a child. Sir Godfrey – their father – was an old man.'

'It's how I feel,' Fletton said. 'I'm sorry if it's stupid. They were – Fletton. I'm not. Now they're all dead, and here I am instead, very much out of place. But I'd nowhere else to go.'

The door opened, and a man came in.

'Ken,' the Rector said, rising. 'Come along. Here's Godfrey Fletton come to tea. Godfrey, this is my son, Ken.'

'Godfrey?' the blind man said. He stopped in surprise. 'Oh yes, of course.' He came forward again.

'Have this chair, Ken,' the Rector said.

'I can find a place for myself, dad,' the blind man said. 'Sit down. Where are you, Fletton?' He held out his hand. Fletton took it, and received a quick strong grip.

'Nice to meet you,' the blind man said.

'And you,' Fletton said. He stood embarrassedly, watching the other fumble for a chair, not daring to help him; until he found one, and sat down.

'Tea, Harry?' he said. 'Don't stop talking.'

'On the table at your elbow,' she said. 'We were just chattering.'

'I found Godfrey in Gribble's,' the Rector said. 'And cut him out right from under the enemy's guns. But unfortunately, too late.'

'Godfrey,' Harriet said. 'You haven't opened an account?'

'He has,' the Rector said.

'This goes on all the time, Fletton,' Ken said. 'It's an

obsession with both of them. I say if they feel so strongly about it they should cover the village with little notices. No accounts with Gribble. By order.'

'Obsession,' Harriet said. 'Possession would be a better word – like a devil.'

The Rector laughed. 'I wouldn't rate him as high as that,' he said.

'But I do,' she insisted. 'He sits there behind his counter like a spider, spinning his dirty little webs –'

'But spiders aren't devils,' the Rector said.

'They are if you happen to be a fly,' Harriet retorted. 'Your trouble is that you underrate the devil –'

'God forbid,' the Rector said, seriously.

'Or overrate him, then. You think he's only concerned with souls, but he isn't.'

'He goes in for faked accounts, too,' Ken said.

'And a lot more,' she said. 'A lot more goes on in that shop than selling cheese.'

'You don't mean he catches mice as well?' Ken said. 'Some spider.'

'Clown,' she said.

'He does a bit of black market on the side,' Fletton said. 'He tried it on me.'

'There you are,' she said. 'You see. What did you say?'

'I told him to go to hell,' Fletton said. 'I beg your pardon,' he said to the Rector.

'That's all right,' the Rector said equably. 'If he is a devil, it was a very good thing to say.'

'Don't get me wrong,' Fletton said. 'I'm not pl. I just don't like the little brute.'

'It's a very odd thing,' the Rector began, reflectively, 'how people always feel impelled to explain away a right action. Now you, my boy –'

'Father,' his son and daughter said together. 'Any time's sermon time with dad,' the son said to Fletton. 'We have to watch him like hawks –' He tapped his forehead as if to remind himself. 'Wrong metaphor,' he said lightly. The

Rector covered his eyes with his hand. 'You have to ride him with a tight rein, or –'

'I refuse to be diverted from the Gribble,' Harriet said quickly. She glanced at her father and away. 'You know, I believe nearly everybody in the village owes him money – and what the interest must be makes me shudder to think. I had another go at Mrs Sloan this morning, father – she shut up like an oyster. Wouldn't admit a thing.'

'Perhaps she thought it was her own business,' the Rector said, tiredly.

'It may not be my business,' she said with vigour. 'But if he's bleeding her dry under our very noses, she's your parishioner, and it's certainly yours.'

'And what do you expect me to do, child?' he asked.

'Exorcize the devil,' she said. 'It's your job.'

He smiled at her with complete understanding. 'I'll have to read up the ritual,' he said. 'And go and recite it to him.' He turned to Fletton. 'This is poor entertainment for Godfrey,' he said. 'You must be bored to tears with our village gossip.'

'I don't see why he should be,' she said. 'After all, it's his village.'

'Mine?' Fletton said, sharply.

'Fletton's Fletton,' she said. 'However much you deny it.'

'Here we go,' her brother murmured.

'What do you mean?' she said.

'Hobby-horse,' he said, gently jeering.

'Oh, tripe,' she said. 'You think you can make anything sound silly by sticking a silly label on it, but labels don't scare me.' The Rector was watching her with a loving look. 'I never knew,' she said to Fletton, 'what a – a sink this village is, until I got out of it. I've been in the Wrens for five years, and coming back it hits you right between the eyes. Gribble' – she made a little gesture with her hand – 'he doesn't really matter: he's just a symptom. It's the whole place – it's sick. Dying. Everyone that had anywhere else to go, has gone – nearly all the younger ones – I

don't believe there's anybody in the place who wouldn't be out to-morrow if they could.'

'I wouldn't,' the Rector said.

'You,' she said. 'You and Gribble – you've got a stake in other people's darkness.'

'That's not very nice,' he said. He pondered a little, scratching his nose. 'You know I've never classed myself with Gribble.'

'And that's *my* village,' Fletton said. 'I don't think I want it.'

'But you've got it,' she said. 'Everything's someone's responsibility. Fletton happens to be yours.'

He shrugged, wishing irritably that she would stop talking. 'There's the government,' he suggested. 'Why don't you write to your M.P. about it?' he said, with a sour smile.

'My God,' she said.

'Harriet,' her father said.

'I'm sorry, father,' she said. 'But really –' She was very angry. Her fine eyes sparkled. 'That's the only kind of remark that ever makes me want to swear. Just because we graciously consent to elect a government, we needn't worry about a thing any more.'

'Except the income tax,' her brother said softly. She ignored him.

'If that's all we've got out of the war, it's a pity we ever won it, and the sooner someone drops an atomic bomb on us and wipes us out of the way, the better.'

'What do you think I got out of the war, Miss Barnes?' Fletton said.

'The chance to do something better by this place than your family ever did,' she said.

'Harriet,' the Rector said. 'I think that's enough.'

'It's all right, sir,' Fletton said. 'Please.' He could feel himself trembling inwardly.

The girl leaned forward. 'I'm not just being rude,' she said. 'Honestly I'm not. But it's so plain: you've only to

use your eyes. Have you seen the cottages behind the station?’

He shook his head.

‘Back-to-backs,’ she said. ‘A slum in the middle of the country. Crumbling to bits, no sanitation, hardly any roofs on some of them. But they still bring in rent. We had an American aerodrome at Dakerford during the war – that’s three miles away. All we’ve got now is a desert of concrete and two farms less. I’m not blaming the Americans – they put Fletton out of bounds as soon as they realized, and they *were* free with their money. There’s a black baby in there too. But the point is: that’s Fletton – only fit to be out of bounds. They’re the old miners’ cottages. Flettons built them.’

She stopped. Fletton said nothing. The Rector spoke first.

‘It’s all quite true,’ he said sighing, ‘unfortunately. We’ve been waiting for years for the county to do something. Just before the war, it looked as though they might, but of course it fell through like everything else. And I must admit that when I heard you were coming, I did think: now perhaps – but this is hardly the time. What are your plans, my boy? Are you going to open the Hall?’

‘I don’t think Miss Barnes had quite finished,’ Fletton said politely.

‘I had, really,’ she said. ‘I didn’t even mean to start. It was just – I don’t know. Here’s the village, and all its wretched little Mrs Sloans; Gribble on one side, waxing fat; and George Ames on the other, keeping himself to himself. Here’s us in the churchyard: they have their illegitimate babies – and worse: I’ve got two children in the school next door, one a brother’s by his sister, one a father’s by his daughter – they bring them to father to christen, and send them to me to teach them to read and sign Gribble’s I.O.U.’s.’

‘My dear,’ the Rector said.

‘It’s no good mincing words, father,’ she said. ‘That’s

what's going on all the time – and what can we do about it? You're the church – you want their souls; I'm the state, I want their minds and bodies. They know it – we've nothing to *give* them that they're interested in, or if we have they're too suspicious of the hook to swallow it. And there on the other side is the Hall like a great rotten carcass, because the spirit's gone out of it. I believe – I do honestly and sincerely believe – that in the old days the Hall *could* do something, because it *could* represent disinterested service. I don't say it always did – Fletton's a pretty poor example – but it could. And it should.' She looked into the fire. 'I met Godfrey in Cairo, during the war. We used to talk about it: what we *could* do. Something new and fresh, not tied up with politics, and vote catching, and Organization. Just personal service – a kind of dedication. Godfrey - had something. He was killed just after.'

She stopped speaking. The fire *crackled*; the rain rippled against the windows.

'And I'm not your Godfrey,' Fletton said harshly. 'I told you. And I'll tell you what I got out of the war. Peace. Just that: just the right not to be at war, not to go on fighting. The right not to have to look over my shoulder before every breath in case the guard's watching and doesn't happen to like the idea of me breathing. That's all *I've* got, and by God I'm going to keep it. Can you understand that? I've been back in this country a year, and the more I see of it the less I like it. I've learnt not to like things that are pushed at me, and when they're pushed at me by a pack of grabbing lawyers and petty black marketeers and incestuous village yokels I like them less. I'm not a Fletton, except by accident. I never met another Fletton except my father. He was a tobacconist in Camberwell whose name happened to be Fletton: the Flettons had no use for him or for his father, and no use for me. He called me Godfrey because – God knows why he did: to get his own back, or out of some idiot pride: the same reason he sent me to a decent school. Well, I've got no

pride, no *esprit de corps*: I've got a body that needs feeding now and again; that's why I'm here. And if the Hall's a rotting carcass, that suits me fine. It'll last my time.'

He stood up abruptly. 'I must go,' he said. 'Thank you for the tea.' The Rector stood up too. 'I'm sorry I'm not the man you were looking for,' Fletton said. 'And I'm sorry if I've been rude – I think you started it.' He went towards the door, and through it. The Rector helped him on with his coat,

'Godfrey,' he began.

'Please,' Fletton said.

'I was only going to say,' the Rector said, 'I noticed you in the church this morning.'

Fletton turned and faced him. 'I was resting,' he said defiantly.

'Come and rest again,' the Rector said. He opened the door. 'Good night, my boy.'

From the gate Fletton said: 'Tell your daughter I don't draw rents from the mine cottages. There's no income attached to my – inheritance.'

'I will,' the Rector said. 'Good night.'

He closed the door and went back into the room.

'Well,' he said.

'Well,' his son said. 'Congratulations, Harry. I'm going upstairs.' He went out.

Fletton stumbled up the drive. He was crying without knowing it; the tears gave a saltish flavour to the rain on his lips.

Chapter Five

*

SAM JUKES, the butcher, lived at No. 9 Spurling Road, next to the police house. The front window of No. 9 had been replaced by a white-painted wooden lattice, unglazed, through which, when he was in, the fat shape of Jukes could be made out moving mysteriously in a dank atmosphere of sawdust and blood. No. 7 had a board with the words 'County Police' over its door and a bracket of china telephone insulators just under the eaves; otherwise both were small nondescript terrace houses in no way different from their neighbours.

The butcher and the policeman were good enough friends; neither especially liked the other, but both set a high value on 'getting along'. Jukes respected Helliwell for his book-learning. Helliwell would not have been surprised to learn that Jukes had committed any number of petty offences, though he was careful not to learn anything of the kind. Jukes wore a bowler hat and a full moustache like a comedian; the constable in his peaked cap had the air of a smart and studious soldier. Neither was ever seen, except in church, without his headgear; but Sarah Jukes knew that Sam unhatted had a low brow and cunning piggy eyes, while Helliwell's curiously innocent and child-like look, his bald dome exposed, filled his young wife's bosom with a tender and suffocating warmth. In fact, Jukes was not very cunning, nor police-constable Helliwell particularly innocent.

The rain cleared away finally during Wednesday night. On Thursday morning, Jukes and Helliwell emerged together, backwards, from No. 9 and No. 7, each drawing after him an immensely tall bicycle. They exchanged a gesture of the head, half nod and half shake – a diagonal movement of the chin downward toward the right shoulder.

Both looked up at the blue early sky, and then at the weather-vane on the church tower. The wind was a little to the east of south. The sun glittered in the puddles on the worn asphalt of the roadway.

'Fairing,' the policeman said. He lifted his bicycle down on to the road, setting a pedal against the lowest of the three steps of the kerb.

'Ah,' the butcher said. 'If t'wind 'olds.' He leaned his machine against the lattice of the shop front, and bending with difficulty took hold of the right bottom corner of his butcher's apron, blue with white stripes. He drew this up across his body and tucked it into his belt. Helliwell closed the door of No. 7 with a kind of skilled stealth. Nevertheless, his wife heard him, and waved to him through the lace curtains of the window: he affected not to notice. She did the same thing every morning, and it embarrassed him. He pulled down his tunic all round and squared his shoulders. The butcher had disappeared into the shop; his voice blasted out through the door and through the lattice: 'Sally! I'm off.' A distant scream answered him. He came out, carrying a flat wicker basket filled with limp parcels of bloodstained newspaper; he dropped the basket into a metal frame attached to the handle bars of his bicycle.

'Comin' to summat,' he said to the policeman. 'See that?' He picked up the smallest of his parcels and let it fall again. 'For t' Hall, that is. T' Hall, mind.'

Helliwell became alert. 'Sir Godfrey?' he said.

'Ah,' the grocer said. 'Sir Godfrey.' He gave the title sardonic emphasis. 'I've waited years for t' Hall t' oppen up again; years, mind – and now it's 'appened: one and tuppence. Half a mile or more up that bloody drive for one bloody ration.'

'Taking it yourself?' Helliwell said.

'Who else?' the butcher said. 'How many errand lads d'you think I keep?' This was mere self-justification. He had been told to send the meat by Gribble's daughter, but his curiosity was too strong.

The policeman rubbed his jaw. He was worried; for two nights he had slept in snatches, waking up time after time to ask himself: what else could he have done? – what did Sir Godfrey really want him to do? There was no one he could turn to. He had not even told his wife, not because she would have worried, but because her unquestioning confidence would have been such an affront to his own interior insufficiency. You do what you think right, Andrew, she would have said calmly: something equally unhelpful and equally infuriating; and the outcome would have been words, himself snapping and Violet in tears. Helliwell loved his wife, and could not bear to see her cry; so he had kept the whole thing to himself, bitten his lip in private and smiled smoothly when she was by, stared vacantly at the ceiling for hours each night, and now reached the desperate verge of confiding in Mr Jukes. Speech actually trembled on his lips when the butcher took a step nearer and said:

‘Hey.’ He glanced about him furtively.

Helliwell stepped back. ‘What?’ he said.

The butcher beckoned him closer with a lift of his chin; the policeman retreated again. ‘What’s up wi’ him?’ the butcher said, with a look of ineffable slyness. ‘Eh?’

‘Up with who?’ the policeman said irritably. ‘What the hell’re you talking about?’

‘Him,’ the butcher said. ‘T’new squire. You’ve seen him.’

‘Who says so?’ Helliwell said, gaining time.

‘You took young Ted Sloan up to t’Hall Tuesday,’ the butcher said.

‘Who says so?’ the policeman said again. ‘Has young Ted been talking?’

‘Him?’ the butcher said disgustedly. ‘No – he’s as mum as a sheep’s head.’

‘He’d better be,’ the policeman said.

‘T’whole place saw you,’ Jukes said. ‘Come on – what happened, like?’

'Nowt happened,' the policeman said. 'I was on business – official. And the sooner the whole place learns to mind its own affairs –'

'Well,' Jukes said. 'What'd you think, anyhow – o' t'nnew squire?' His little eyes shone greedily up at the policeman.

'I thought nowt,' Helliwell said. 'I told you: I was on business.' He could not believe that only a moment ago he might have – He shuddered inwardly.

'Know what Jim Gribble says?' the butcher said.

'Jim Gribble's a fool,' Helliwell said austere.

The butcher nodded, too intent to listen. 'Cracked,' he said with relish. 'That's what Jim Gribble says. Bart or no bart, he says' – the butcher tapped his forehead, nodding, in imitation of the graphic Mr Gribble – 'balmy.'

'Jim Gribble wants to be careful,' Helliwell said. 'He wants to watch himself. That's slander, very near –'

'Ere,' the butcher said, alarmed. 'You're not –'

'No, I'm not,' the policeman said. 'Take my advice and you won't neither. You watch your step, Sam Jukes, that's my advice to you.'

'Ah,' the butcher said. 'You're reight, Mr Helliwell.' He shook his head, reprovingly, pursing his lips. 'There's old Lane too – he's another.'

'Another what?' the policeman said.

'Wants to watch himself,' Jukes said. 'He says he caught squire lifting eggs, Sunday – from t'hen huts.'

'That's a lie,' Helliwell said, without thought. He had heard this story himself, and wondered, but now he reacted automatically, forgetting his own prudent advice. 'If anyone's cracked in these parts it's old Lane. Who told you, anyhow? Did he?'

'No,' Jukes said, 'come to think on it, it was Jim.'

'There you are then,' Helliwell said.

'Aye, that's reight,' Jukes said thoughtfully.

It did not strike either of them that it was an inconclusive end to their conversation. They stood a moment con-

templating the ground, then together, still in silence, mounted their huge bicycles and pedalled slowly up the road, Jukes in mid-air like a bouncing ball, Helliwell, who could place both his feet flat on the ground while still astride, like a solemn secretary-bird, moving his legs abstractedly as if they did not belong to him. At the entrance to the square they parted, the butcher turning left round the square, the policeman going straight on, past the church, towards Stewbury.

Harriet Barnes, arranging flowers at the table in the window, saw them go by. 'There go Piggy Jukes and that solemn ass Helliwell,' she said to her brother.

'Helliwell's all right,' Ken said lazily. 'And I don't think you ought to call the rector's churchwarden Piggy.'

'Piggy is as piggy does,' she said. 'Churchwarden or not. And as for Police-constable Andrew, it depends what you expect of a policeman.'

'What do you expect?' he said.

'I wouldn't mind if he ever did anything,' she said.

'Such as?' he said.

'Such as not riding majestically about looking like the Lord Chief Justice,' she said. 'And then when you tackle him about something like Gribble's account – oh, what's the good of talking.'

'I think he did pretty well over Gribble's account,' Ken said. 'Shut *you* up, Harry.'

'Shut me up,' she said indignantly, 'I like that.'

'You'd have looked a bit silly if he'd let you go on,' he said. 'You hadn't a shadow of proof –'

'That's his business,' she said. 'I could have given him a dozen things I know are true. It's up to him to get the proof.'

'Snooping round in false whiskers, I suppose,' he said. 'Come off it.'

'You make me tired,' she said. 'It was his chance to get after Gribble, instead of which the brute's still battenning –'

'I like battening,' he said. 'Nice juicy word. Battening.'
He smacked his lips.

'Well, isn't he?' she said. 'If you know a better word –'

'Mr Gribble,' he said, 'is performing a useful service to this community, such as it is. The fault lies not in Gribble, but in our stars, old girl. And anyway, where should we be with all our leading citizens in quod?'

'So there's nothing we can do about anything, then?' she said.

'We can leave things alone,' he said. She was silent. 'What now?' he asked.

'It's Piggy,' she said. 'He's just going in at the Hall gates.'

'Delivering, I expect,' he said

'I wonder what kind of reception he'll get,' she said. 'Helliwell came away with a flea in his ear over young Ted, if you can believe Mrs Sloan.' She turned away from the window, and sat down opposite her brother. 'And old Goodbrand wasn't exactly welcomed either. He was up there yesterday.'

'Bit backward for our worthy J.P.,' Ken said. 'What kept him on Monday and Tuesday?'

She ignored this. 'Look, Ken,' she said, 'seriously – don't you think we ought to do something – about Godfrey Fletton?'

'Seriously,' he said, 'no. Prescription as before. Leave him alone.'

'For his own sake, I mean,' she said.

'Ha, ha,' her brother said.

'All right,' she said. 'Laugh if you want to –'

'I don't,' he said. 'I was just jeering'

'Well, jeer away,' she said. 'I mean it. You don't hear all the tales going about the village –'

'The Lord's name be praised,' he said.

'– and now there's old Goodbrand. He ploughed his way up there yesterday, just to be neighbourly –'

'My foot,' Ken said.

‘– and there wasn’t a soul about, no answer when he knocked, couldn’t hear a sound.’

‘Shocking,’ Ken said. ‘No brass band? Not even a red carpet?’

‘So he went round to the yard –’

‘Trust him,’ Ken said.

‘– and found a kind of cross between a market-day and a farm auction. All the stable doors open –’

‘And all the horses gone?’ he said in a hushed voice.

‘Oh, shut up,’ she said. ‘Do you want to hear or don’t you?’

‘No kidding,’ he said. ‘Can I –?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘The yard was full of the most extraordinary collection of rubbish –’

‘Bet he said “clobber,” ’ Ken said.

‘All right,’ she said, laughing. ‘Fool. Clobber.’

‘Good old Major,’ Ken said.

‘– pitchforks, part of a sewing-machine, shovels, an old harness rack, an anvil, buckets, a dog-cart with one wheel –’

‘He didn’t make out a list?’ Ken said, incredulously.

‘Of course he didn’t,’ she said. ‘But he was taken round in the pouring rain and made to look at every single thing, as if it was some kind of treasure.’

‘Served him damned well right,’ Ken said.

‘Why did it?’ she said. ‘Poor old devil – in the pouring rain. I told you. There was no one about when he got there, but he could hear someone moving, so he shouted and shouted. Then Fletton came out of one of the stables with an ancient old lantern in his hand. He came out into the yard, no jacket, no hat, and said a most peculiar thing. He said: “Plain clothes this time, eh?” I suppose the old man looked a bit blank – who wouldn’t? – because then Fletton said he thought he was another policeman. The Major said no, he was an old soldier, and Fletton in the rudest possible way said: “That kind that never die? And *you* don’t fade away either. What do you want?” The Major said he’d just called, and Fletton said: “Oh, to buy something? What

about this? Want a lamp?" Goodbrand said no, he'd just come to see -, and before he could finish, Fletton said: "All right. Take a good look then." And he bullied the old man round the yard positively rubbing his nose into one wretched piece of junk after another, until at last to get away he bought a bucket -'

'He what?' her brother said.

'He bought a bucket,' she said. 'For sixpence.'

'I don't believe it,' Ken said.

'It's true,' she said. 'I hardly believed it either, but the Major said he'd show me the bucket -'

Her brother began to laugh.

'I don't see what you're laughing at,' she said. 'That poor old man -'

'Poor old Aunt Fanny,' Ken said. 'Serve the old pest right. Chap's minding his own business, getting down to a job of work, and in comes old Goodbrand, snuffling round like a superannuated sanitary inspector. Jolly good way of getting rid of him, I call it -'

'But he *couldn't* get away,' Harriet said. 'That was why he bought the bucket. As it was he was nearly dragged round the house too -'

'O.K.,' Ken said. 'Have it your own way.'

'The Major thinks he's crazy,' she said.

'He's sick,' Ken said.

'Bunk,' she said. 'If he isn't crazy - and I wouldn't be certain - he's disgruntled, and disagreeable, and eaten up with self-pity, and wants shaking out of himself -'

'He's a sick man,' her brother repeated. 'Going well for a crack-up -'

'I don't believe it,' she said.

'His mind's raw,' he said. 'He wants leaving alone, and not badgering, my sweet well-intentioned little badger.'

'Hooey,' she said. 'What do you know about it, anyway?'

'I know the symptoms,' he said quietly.

Her change of tone was almost imperceptible. 'I'm sorry,

Ken,' she said. He found her hand and patted it. She got up and went out, leaving him sitting in darkness.

Helliwell, pedalling slowly along the Stewbury road, looked for no explanation, outside his own inadequacy. It did not even occur to him that Sir Godfrey had been disagreeable, still less that he was sick and ill; if it had he would have dismissed the thought as none of his business. He was not concerned with the Squire's motivation, merely with his desires. And however much he cogitated, still he could not decide what it was Sir Godfrey had really wanted him to do. The only thing he was certain of, was that if ever he came up with young Ted Sloan in the commission of any error not concerning the Squire, young Ted should surely pay, Mrs Sloan or no Mrs Sloan.

'Ah,' he thought, 'he shall suffer for this, if it's the last thing I ever do.' His mind wandered, considering lustfully the various crimes it might some day be his pleasure to pin on Ted Sloan. It called for no great stretch of the imagination, nor for any unbecoming ideas of trap or frame-up. Young Ted was eminently eligible for a prominent place in a police officer's idle thoughts. There was, for instance, his greyhound bitch, a lean wolf. A mongrel kept kennelled all day and taken for walks in the cool of the evening, in the dusk. Ted paid for a licence for the creature, as Helliwell had been at pains to find out; that in itself was sufficient to indicate a hidden profit-earning capacity in its emaciated body. Rabbits, maybe, or hares, or even a sitting pheasant now and again – Or there were his goings-on with the girls: Hilda Taylor – it was true she had fathered her baby on an unknown sailor at Corby, but young Ted had certainly been sniffing round in the same quarter – and now there was Sue Gribble – something would probably come of that, sooner or later. And that job of his, if you could call it a job: potboy at the Railway Arms in Stewbury. Sanger the potman made a book in a small way, on the side; it did not need second sight to envisage Ted acting as his runner.

Passing betting slips was a nice little charge – or drink –

And here the constable, alone in the windy sunlight, flushed right up under his peaked cap: here was his problem back again, looking him in the eyes.

It had been on Monday night just before dark that Helliwell had met young Ted, who was making his erratic way, singing, in the direction of his home. He lived with his mother in one of the miners' old cottages, which lay off the Dakerford road, at the back of the railway station. The constable, coming from Dakerford, overtook the boy by the end of the park wall, and thought: now where's that young rip been – in the park? And where's that dog of his?

As he drew level he could distinguish the words of Ted's song: Money is the Root of all Evil. The words were as moral as his voice was tuneful – he had been a choirboy until it broke; but the constable was not impressed by either. He merely thought: that's not likely to worry you, my lad; and was about to pass when the singer lurched suddenly, almost knocking him off his bicycle. Helliwell put down his long legs to the road, half-turned, and said angrily: 'Hey. What the heck do you think you're doing?'

'Minding my own bloody business,' the boy said. 'Whyn't you look where you're going to – copper?'

'None of your lip, now,' the policeman said. 'And mind out I don't make it my business, see?'

'No, I don't see,' the boy said. He tossed his head to put his long fair hair, in which raindrops glinted, out of his eyes. He put up his fists and said solemnly: 'Want a fight? Eh?'

The policeman eyed him, frowning. 'You're drunk,' he said incredulously.

'Drunk yourself,' the boy said. He dropped his hands, looked over his shoulder, and grinned slowly, swaying a little on his feet. 'Hey,' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'Want a sup?' He put a hand in his pocket and with a struggle pulled out a flask with a silver cap. He half extended it to the policeman. 'Come on,' he said, winking. 'It's t'reight stuff.'

'You *are* drunk,' the policeman said. 'Where'd you get that flask?'

'Minding my own bloody business,' the boy said again.

'Give it here,' the policeman said.

'My arse,' the boy said. He began to run unsteadily down the road. Helliwell freed himself from his bicycle without haste, rested it on the grassy bank, and ran after him. He caught him with the same unhurried air, laying hold of him with an enormous hand just above the biceps of his left arm. He swung the boy round

'Now then,' he said. 'Give it me.' He tightened his grip.

The boy squealed. 'Let go,' he said. 'You're breaking my arm.' He kicked out at the policeman's shins.

'Ah, would you,' the policeman said. With the other hand he clouted the boy twice about the ears, solidly, forwards and backwards. 'Give over, will you?' he said. 'Come on.' Snivelling, the boy gave him the flask. On the top of the cap were the initials G. F. Helliwell studied these. He sniffed at the cap, and holding the flask to his ear, shook it. He came back to the initials, G. F. G. F., he said under his breath, and stiffened.

'Here,' he said. 'Where've you been?'

'Nowhere,' Ted said sullenly.

'Oh yes you have,' the constable said. 'You've been up at the Hall, haven't you?'

'You're balmy,' the boy said.

'Balmy, am I?' the constable said. 'Look at that: G. F. What's that stand for?'

The boy did not speak.

'I'll tell you what it stands for,' Helliwell said 'Godfrey Fletton, that is. Sir Godfrey. You're for it, my lad.'

'I don't know what the hell you're talking about,' the boy said.

'You don't, don't you?' Helliwell said. 'You just came over the park wall, that's what -'

'I never,' the boy said.

'- you've been sneaking round the Hall, and this here

belongs to Squire, and you've pinched it, and that's a felony, that's what. You're for it, young Ted.'

'Prove it,' the boy said.

'I'll prove it all right,' the policeman said. 'You and me's going to have a nice little talk with Squire. And meantime,' he savoured the words on his tongue, 'I warn you, anything you say'll be taken down and used as evidence against you.'

Ted uttered an obscene word. 'You can tek that down to start with,' he said. 'Dirty talk'll do you no good,' the policeman said. 'Come on now. You're coming with me.' He began to lead the boy back to where he had left his bicycle. Then a thought struck him and he stopped, glancing upwards. He took his watch from an inner pocket and looked at it. It was five minutes past eight; the rain had slackened, momentarily, but though the sky was a little less overcast, it was now darkening with the approach of night. The policeman hesitated, as he always did when he had to make a decision. So far he had been able to act without thought; now a number of considerations occurred to him. He was making an arrest, or on the edge of it: the first in his thirteen years in Fletton. That was all right; luckily no one was likely to grieve about young Ted except possibly his mother, and she was of insufficient standing to cause any real trouble. But to arrest even young Ted he had to have proof; and while he was certain he was right, his reasons were purely presumptive and would never satisfy a bench of magistrates. To get the proof he needed he had to see Sir Godfrey Fletton -

Sir Godfrey. Helliwell had a respect for titles natural to his habit of mind. He was a time-server no more than he was a bully; he based his relations with his fellow men on a philosophy of live and let live, but he revered and feared the gods he served, and the outward sign of divinity was, naturally, a title. He knew practically nothing about the new Squire; village talk reported him through George Ames as pleasant; through Abel Durdon as pleasant but hot

tempered; through Gribble as daft; and through Mr Lane of Dimfold as light-fingered with eggs. And he had given Willie Glover a packet of sweets. All these things had been canvassed by Monday night; and though Helliwell paid as much attention to village talk as it deserved, discounting most of it, he had unconsciously rationalized the reports into a picture of a man progressively less easy to get on with as his interlocutor approached his own rank. In Helliwell's experience such men were apt to treat policemen, representatives of the Law, in effect as their equals, and consequently to show them their hardest side; to be harder in fact with the law-preserver than with the law-breaker. Helliwell thus found himself between two stools: his duty to carry out the law, and his awe of Sir Godfrey Fletton. He accepted the dilemma as part of the policeman's trade, and was swayed by self-interest only to the extent of balancing one side against the other in such a way as to do least damage to either. He was a believer in compromise, like a true Englishman.

He compromised now. It was, he decided, pointless to disturb the Squire at such an hour on what might prove after all to be a wild-goose chase. Gentlemen, quite rightly, did not like to be made to discuss business after dinner, in an atmosphere of soft lights, and cigar smoke, and port wine – his conception of Fletton Hall at eight in the evening, as wildly off the mark as the whole of his estimate of Fletton himself. He decided that if it was Sir Godfrey's flask, no harm would be done, and Sir Godfrey's convenience would be best served, by waiting until the morning. If it wasn't, there was even less reason for immediate action.

'We'll go and see your ma just for a start,' he said to young Ted, putting back his watch.

The boy reacted violently. 'You let my ma alone,' he said. 'Leave her out of this, you big sod.' He tried to break loose.

'Hold your noise,' the policeman said, unmoved. 'Do you want another?' He raised his free hand suggestively. Ted subsided. The policeman gathered up his bicycle. 'Who

brought her into it, anyway?' he said reasonably. 'You should have thought of that before, my lad. Come on.'

They set off down the road, passing the Methodist chapel and approaching the railway station. The station was much too big for the traffic it handled, now, with acres of desolate rusty rails meandering through whole meadows of those weeds, tall lanky daisies, dandelions, which thrive on railway tracks like asphodel on the empty plains of heaven. There were lights in the station, the signal arms were Off: the evening train was nearly due.

'Stir yourself,' Helliwell said. 'We'll get by before the train.'

They hurried; passed the station and turned to the right, between the decaying fence of the railway yard and the ends of a double row of houses, down a narrow lane surfaced with cinders and edged with fearsome growths of nettle. Beyond the houses the fence ran on, curving slightly, to the main gates of Fletton Deep, the old mine, the Folly. From the gates the fence bore to the left, following the mine road, now closed, as far as its entrance at the bridge end of Spurling Road. With Spurling Road, the east side of the square, and the Dakerford Road, the fence enclosed the irregular pentagonal space called The Rents after the houses built in it.

The Rents proper were three double rows of back-to-back cottages running roughly at right-angles between the fence and the garden-ends of the houses on the east side of the square. The outer line of the first double row edged the north side of the Dakerford Road from the station to The Harvesters, and though the poorest decent houses in Fletton were habitable. The inner line were not so good. Then came a widish open space, a cul-de-sac running from the lane to the wall of The Harvesters' stabling, mud as hard as brick in dry weather, a quagmire in wet. Across this space was the second double row of cottages; then there was a second space, and the third double row. Each successive side of each double row was worse than the last, like the circles of

the Inferno. The population of Fletton had decreased since the closing of the mine, so that there were never sufficient tenants for all the cottages. This was fortunate, because many of the cottages had been condemned by the Rural District Council; but in fact some of the condemned were still lived in for lack of better. Young Ted Sloan lived with his mother in a condemned cottage at the top of the near side of the third row.

The policeman and the boy slopped through the puddles along the lane, keeping close to the fence for shelter; an instinctive and pointless precaution as the wind was blowing from almost directly behind them. It was nearly dark, but in spite of this and the rain, which had begun to fall again, there were still children occupied in a desultory way in the mud. There were lights in some of the houses; a gramophone grinding out a thin tinny record of an Irish tenor singing 'Alice Where Art Thou'; no one about but the children. These looked up from what it would have seemed idiotic to call a game, and began to follow, at first silently and then with audible whispered commentary.

'Copper's got him.'

'What's he done?'

'What's ta done, Ted?'

The boy half turned, but the policeman pushed him forward. They came to the third row and turned down along the narrow uneven pavement.

'Which is it?' Helliwell said.

'Number two,' Ted said.

Number one and number three were empty, mere shells without windows, offering through gaping holes in the walls nothing but malodorous shadows. There was a light in number two, and the door stood open. They passed the uncurtained window, with a glimpse of Mrs Sloan bending over a cooking-range, and came to the door. Immediately she called:

'Who is it?'

The policeman gave the boy's arm a little shake. He called

back : 'It's me.' Helliwell leaned his bicycle against the wall, and turning, said to the children: 'Clear off, now. Go on.'

Mrs Sloan called again: 'Who's that with thee?' She came to the door, wiping her hands on a piece of sacking she wore as an apron. Seeing the policeman she put one hand to her mouth, and then to her bosom, grasping the stuff of her dress over her heart.

'What is it?' she said in a whisper; and then louder, shrilly: 'What's ta been doing?'

'I've been doing nowt,' Ted said roughly. 'Get in, y'owd fool.' He gave her a little push with the back of his hand. She retreated, backwards; he followed her, the policeman having released his arm; turned inside the door and said: 'Well, come on then. Don't stand there all neight.'

Helliwell ducked his head and entered, then tried to close the door. It stuck half-way; he struggled with it, glad of the distraction. Mrs Sloan was of no importance, but the look on her face was something he had not bargained for. He got the door shut at last, and came round, red to the ears.

The woman was still standing clutching her breast; as he turned she raised the other hand and pushed back a wisp of grey hair with a kind of desperation. Then both hands fell to her apron and she began again to wipe them industriously. She was a tiny creature; the lad towered over her. They both watched Helliwell silently; he cleared his throat and began: 'Well, Mrs Sloan -'

'Don't Mrs Sloan me,' she said with surprising vigour. 'What's ta want wi' our Ted? What's he done?'

'I've done nowt,' Ted said.

She turned on him furious. 'Ho'd thi whisht,' she said. 'Tha gurt muck. What's he done?' she said again to the policeman.

'I don't know,' he said honestly. 'I'm - I'm not charging him with anything. H'd been drinking out of this -' He produced the flask from his pocket. 'I want to know where he got it.'

She took it from him and looked at it. Then she looked at the boy. 'Tha'd been drinking, had ta?' she said.

'I never -' he began.

She slapped his face sharply. 'Shut up,' she said. 'Let me smell.' He lent down so that she could smell his breath. 'You -' she said. She raised her hand again. He did not move, but looked back at her dangerously. 'And tek that look off thi face,' she said. 'I'm thi mother, and don't go to forget it. Where'd ta get this?'

'I found it,' he said sullenly.

'He found it,' she said to Helliwell.

'That's what he says,' the policeman said. 'I've reason to believe -'

'None of thi fancy talk,' she said. 'There's no gentry here.'

'It's new Squire's,' he said. 'See that on the cap - G. F. - Godfrey Fletton, that is.'

She looked at it again. 'Where'd ta get it?' she said to Ted.

'How many more times?' he said. 'I tell you I found it.'

'Where?' she said.

'On t'road,' he said. He gestured in the direction of Dakerford.

'That'll do me,' she said. 'He's no liar, isn't our Ted.' Her tone lacked certainty.

'That's all very well,' the policeman said. 'I'll have to have more than that.'

'What, then?' she said.

'He'll have to come with me and see Sir Godfrey,' he said. 'In the morning. That's why I brought him back here. I'm going to hold you responsible for him, Mrs Sloan.'

'He'll be here,' she said. 'He found it.'

'All right, then,' he said. 'You're responsible.' He turned back at the door. 'I'm sorry -' he began.

'Keep that for them as wants it,' she said. 'Good neight, Mr Helliwell.'

'Good night,' he said. As he went out he heard her begin: 'So tha'd been drinking, tha good-for-nowt, idle -'

He lit his bicycle lamp, while the children stood in their silent half circle, and Ted's greyhound whined uneasily from its kennel in the empty house next door. The children followed him to the end of the lane. When he came back at half-past nine the next morning, they were still there. They broke to let him through, and again followed quietly; this time there were other people about, but they stood at the doors and watched the policeman go by, saying nothing.

Young Ted was washed and garnished. His face shone, his hair was flattened to his head; he had on a clean shirt and a scarf round his neck, his boots were polished. His mother was grim this morning; when they had gone, she went inside and put on her hat; came out again, and set off for the rectory. Her expression dared anyone to mention the matter to her; no one did. She was late; she hurried, and saw them turn out of the square into the drive in front of her.

They had nothing to say either; young Ted whistled snatches of tune under his breath with elaborate unconcern; once he picked up a stone and threw it at a blackbird perched singing in a tree: the policeman eyed him, and he stared brazenly back. He began to whistle again.

They crossed the bridge and came to the point where the drive branched into two, going right to the stable yard and left to the terrace. The right-hand way was virgin, untrodden; Helliwell hesitated, and decided on the front door; they turned left and came out on the terrace, empty and deserted. It was drizzling from a grey sky. They mounted the steps and stood under the portico. The great door was ajar. Helliwell knocked; the knock went echoing away inside the house. He knocked again, and waited. He pushed the door open a little more and said quietly: 'Anyone there?' The hall swallowed up his voice. He glanced at Ted, who grinned faintly, derisively, and immediately straightened his face into solemnity.

'Well,' Helliwell said. 'We'll have to try the back. Come on, you.'

They went down the steps again, round the side of the house, into the stableyard. The policeman tried the kitchen door; it opened on the same quiet: you could tell the house was empty. Young Ted sat down on the edge of the water trough and began to whistle: 'If you want to know the time, ask a policeman.' Helliwell recognized an implied impudence in the choice of tune. 'That'll do,' he said. 'You can cut that out, my lad.' He felt foolish, but he was not taking anything from Ted Sloan.

A voice spoke. 'What is it now?' it said. A man was looking down at them from the dormer window over the coach-house: untidy hair, pale, unshaven face.

'I'm looking for Sir Godfrey Fletton,' the policeman said.

'Well?' the man said.

'Is he about?' the policeman said.

'I'm Fletton,' the man said. 'Have your look and clear out.'

The policeman straightened. He touched his peaked cap in salute. 'Good morning, Sir Godfrey,' he began respectfully. 'I -'

'For Christ's sake,' Fletton said. 'Will you go away?'

'I'm sorry to trouble you, Sir Godfrey,' Helliwell said. 'But -'

Fletton's face twitched. He shouted suddenly: 'Don't keep yammering "Sir Godfrey," you stupid idiot. Get out!' He withdrew his head and slammed the window down.

Helliwell was nonplussed; this was even worse than he had expected. He put up his hand to push back his cap, and noticed that the boy was now grinning openly, though his eyes were cast down. He was suddenly enormously irritated. By gum, he thought, I wish I'd never seen the bloody thing. For two pins I'd drop it. But he could not; he had his duty to do. 'You,' he said in a suppressed tone: 'tek that grin off your face, before I wipe it off for you.'

The boy looked up innocently, his eyes exaggeratedly round. 'Me?' he said. 'I weren't grinning, Mr Helliwell. I were just thinking.'

'Well, stop thinking,' the constable said. 'I don't like it.'

'Yes, Mr Helliwell,' the boy said. 'I just hope you don't get yourself in trouble – through me an all.'

Rage stuck in Helliwell's throat so that he could not speak. There was a sound from inside the coach-house and Fletton appeared at the door. He leaned against the door-post and said: 'Look. I'm trying to sleep. If you've taken a fancy to the place, if there's nowhere else you can get down to a good talk: make yourselves at home.' He made a gesture. 'Bring the whole village in if you want to.' His voice rose. 'But don't do it under my bloody window. D'you understand?'

'Yes, Sir Godfrey,' the policeman said. 'But there's –'

'You're a policeman,' Fletton said.

'Yes, Sir Godfrey,' Helliwell said.

Fletton closed his eyes. 'It's your job,' he said at last. 'It's your job to keep people out, not to come barging –'

'But there's something I've got to see you about,' Helliwell said desperately.

'What?' Fletton said.

'This here,' Helliwell said. He produced the flask. Fletton took it.

'What of it?' he said.

'It's got G. F. on the cap,' Helliwell said.

'So it has,' Fletton said. 'There's no law against it, is there?'

'But is it yours?' the policeman said. 'That's what –'

'It's mine,' Fletton said. 'Is *that* wrong?'

'No, sir,' the policeman said. 'Of course not. But this boy had it in his possession –'

'Had he?' Fletton said. 'Is that all?'

'He'd been drinking out of it,' Helliwell said.

'Good idea,' Fletton said. 'That's what it's for.' He unscrewed the cap, put the flask to his mouth, and drained it. He shuddered.

'But what I want to know is where he got it, sir,' Helliwell said. 'Did he get it from you?'

'Look, constable,' Fletton said. 'What you want seems to be a lot more important than what I want –'

'Oh no, sir,' the policeman said. 'But it's my duty –'

'I'm not going to argue with you about duty,' Fletton said. 'There's more than one way of looking at that. Did it ever strike you that I might have given the boy my flask, I might have lent it to him, I might have sold it to him –?'

'But did you, sir?' the constable said.

'Oh, go to hell,' Fletton said. 'I'm sick of this. What the hell's it got to do with you? Who sent you here, anyway? What's the idea?'

'I'd reason to believe –' Helliwell began patiently.

'You'd reason to believe that just because I happen to be here, just because my name's Fletton, I'd help you to clear up some bloody mess that's nothing to do with me, help you to a bit of well-deserved promotion –'

'No, Sir Godfrey,' Helliwell said with dignity.

Fletton put his hand to his head. 'No, of course not,' he said wearily. 'You're a good chap, I don't doubt it. But you've come at a bad time. I don't want to be worried. You did quite right. If you think the boy stole it, charge him, of course, but don't drag me into it. I want to be left alone. Do you understand?'

'Yes sir,' the policeman said doubtfully.

'Then leave me alone, like a good chap. And anyone you see coming up here, warn them off, will you?'

'Yes, sir,' Helliwell said. 'Come on you,' he said to Ted.

'Just a minute,' Fletton said. 'Look: boy.' He took a pound note from his pocket. 'What's your name?'

'Ted Sloan,' Ted said.

'Right,' Fletton said. 'Well, take the flask and this note' – he passed them over – 'give them to George Ames at the Fletton Arms, and ask him to fill the flask with whisky. Tell him I'm the chap he was talking to on Saturday night. Got that?'

The boy nodded.

'Then bring the flask back and put it somewhere I can find it. Don't worry me. And if there's any change, keep it. See?'

'Yes, Sir Godfrey,' the boy said.

'Get out,' Fletton said between his teeth. 'Go on. Both of you.'

He turned and went back into the stable; they could hear him climbing the ladder. They walked the whole length of the drive without saying a word, but just inside the gate Helliwell took young Ted by the shoulder.

'Now hark,' he said. 'Take this in. You've been lucky so far. You pinched that flask all right – no more of your lies: I'm not soft – and Sir Godfrey's left it to me whether to prosecute or not. You heard him. Well, I'm not doing owt – yet; but if I hear one wink of this from anyone, I'll know you've been opening your trap – and that'll settle it. I'll see you in clink if it's the last thing I ever do. See?'

'Yes, Mr Helliwell,' young Ted said submissively.

'All right,' the policeman said. 'Don't you forget it.'

And that was all. That had been Tuesday, two days ago; and ever since then he had been wondering, should he have taken the matter further? Did Sir Godfrey really think a policeman could prosecute without a definite charge made? Did he *want* to prosecute? Was a day going to come when the Squire would emerge from retirement and ask: What happened to the boy that stole my flask? How long did he get? And then, quite reasonably: But *why* didn't you tell me? – the kind of question there's no possible answer to, except: Because you were unreasonable, Sir Godfrey – no answer at all.

Helliwell sighed, gustily. He had checked with George Ames: young Ted had had the flask filled and gone off with eight and ninepence change. George Ames thought Sir Godfrey a nice quiet lad, a chap you could take to; not much comfort, but all there was.

He pedalled on. Where the farm road turned off to Dimfold, Abel Durdon, leaning on his bicycle, was talking to old

Lane, who was in the trap he used for his milk delivery. The postman, Helliwell could see from quite a distance, was pounding on the saddle of his bike, emphatically; the farmer raised a fist at him in return. Nearer, he saw that Durdon was shaking, and the farmer purple with fury. O God, he thought – more trouble. He swung off his bicycle and said cheerily, 'Morning, gentlemen.' Both men acknowledged him without interrupting their argument.

'And I'm telling you, Mr Lane,' the postman was saying, 'you can't say that kind of thing. It's wrong. A nice young chap like that; I never heard such a tale. It's wrong, and you know it's wrong. It's – it's wicked.' He was in an almost comic state of agitation, hopping from foot to foot, his teeth clicking and rattling so that his words were almost unintelligible.

'Wicked is it?' Lane said. 'I'm a liar, you mean –'

'I didn't say so,' Durdon said. 'I said no such thing.'

'It's what you meant,' Lane said. 'Because he's a Fletton, he's right, and I'm a liar. I know what you mean, never fear, you doddering old fool. It means nowt that I found him in a locked field, trespassing, with our Jack's gun that he'd no right to, lifting my eggs. It means nowt that when I threw him out he'd not a word to say, for all his brass –'

Helliwell boiled over. 'Hey,' he said. 'Just a minute.'

'What now?' the old man said.

'Did you say Sir Godfrey Fletton was *stealing* eggs from your field?' the policeman said.

'*Sir* Godfrey Fletton,' the old man said. '*Sir* Godfrey.' He spat over the side of the trap.

'Did you say stealing?' the policeman said.

'What if I did?' Lane said.

'You'll be wanting to charge him, then,' Helliwell said. There was a short silence. 'Are you making a charge or not?' he insisted. The old man spat again. 'Because if not you're looking for an action for slander,' Helliwell said. 'There's too much loose talk in these parts: I'm warning you; go easy, Mr Lane. That's all.'

'You go to hell,' the farmer said. He laid his whip about his horse's flanks, and the trap lurched off down the road.

Durdon looked at the policeman admiringly. 'Well,' he said. 'I'd never have credited it.'

'Ah,' the policeman said. 'I told him.' He felt better. He pulled down his tunic all round, squaring his shoulders.

Chapter Six



SUE GRIBBLE, Jim Gribble's daughter, seldom opened her mouth in public, nor raised her eyes; her father, whose judgement was respected, considered her to be half-witted, or next door to it.

On the Monday that Fletton made the grocer's acquaintance, Sue was sixteen years old. There were no celebrations. With one difference, the day was the same as any other. She rose at five-thirty, lit the fire, and took her father a cup of tea in bed. She went down the Spurling road as far as the bridge, where Gribble kept his hens on a strip of waste land by the stream; fed the hens and collected the eggs; returned home and cooked the breakfast. At eight, when the van with the papers arrived from Corby, she was ready to begin the day with their delivery. After that there were the groceries to take round, the house to clean, the dinner to cook, and the garden to do. Gribble liked fresh greens and saw no reason why he should have to buy them.

All in all a day like any other, except that during the morning Sue came to the conclusion that she was in the family way. She hugged the idea to her. Her imagination was too untrained to envisage any consequent unpleasantness. She wanted to get married, and though there seemed little chance of that, a baby would make a good start. the first item for her bottom drawer, as it were. I'll have to tell Ted, she thought.

It was not at all likely that she would see Ted before the end of the week, but this did not worry her either. She had the patience of the seasons, and some of their inevitability. She took her father's instruction to deliver Fletton's order to the Hall in that spirit; it was an extra job, and she was tired, but it did not really matter: when it was done, she would go to bed and sleep.

She plodded up the drive, heavily laden; Gribble had taken the opportunity to rid himself of a number of things whose sale he had almost stopped thinking about, as well as some already well used in the Gribble kitchen. An open order was something not to be missed, particularly when the giver was as gormless as the new Squire. So the brown earthenware teapot, big enough for a family of twelve, had a chipped spout and was cracked across the base; the iron kettle was rusty; and the hatchet had been hastily settled up on the grindstone. The fact that Sue was bowed down like Christian under his pack was irrelevant, like the rain.

She carried a basket on one arm, with the groceries and odds and ends; and in the other hand the ironmongery and kitchen utensils, strung together with a piece of twine. Half-way up the drive she had to stop, and change hands, because the twine cut into her fingers; she wiped her nose and pulled up her black woollen stockings, singing under her breath all the time.

She picked up basket and bundle and started off again as young Ted, with the flask in his pocket, looked furtively out on to the portico and ran like a hare for the terrace stairs. When she reached the terrace, automatically following the crushed trail Fletton had left in the morning, Ted had gone; she climbed the steps and stood in front of the great door, rather breathless, and caught no shadow or echo of his passage. She rubbed the palms of her hands down the skirt over her thighs, and knocked. There was, of course, no answer, and after a moment she knocked again. This time she noticed the door was open, but she was without curiosity. It was not her business. When no one came, she thought, can't wait all day. She opened the door, and squatting just inside, put the things from the basket on to the floor, and the bundle beside them. She pulled the door to without closing it, and walked back down the drive, singing quietly. Just before she reached the gates, Fletton passed her, but she was in the shadow of the trees and he did not see her. She saw him plainly, and was disturbed; he looked

right sad, she thought, ever so nice, but sad. She got no inkling of the devils that were driving him, but as she crossed the square back to the shop she had stopped singing. She wished there had been something she could do, but there wasn't, and in any case what she thought didn't count, and nothing she'd wished had ever come true yet.

*

Fletton had his worst night since his return to England. The lightening of his spirits on the Sunday had been a reaction: he had for once, as he saw it, acted like a normal human being; he had made up his mind to do something, and done it. He had found a roof under which he could live an independent life of his own. He was his own sole master.

That lasted for a day and a night. Then the petty details of living, the unsought interest of other persons, the upshooting strangling tendrils of man's responsibility to man, caught him again. The second reaction was more violent than the first, the dark abyss of despair was darker for having left it, even for so short a time. His despair was irrational, but none the less solid; the fact that he recognized it for what it was, a mere neurosis, deepened it further still. He did not articulately think this, would not; he felt it in all his nerves and muscles, like a languorous and creeping paralysis. He stood in the doorway of his stable and watched the silvery flecks of rain against the night; climbed the ladder and came down again; walked up and down the yard in the rain. He even went into the house for a time and stumbled through the dark passages: on Sunday, in the daylight, in the false dawn when he had been able to see himself objectively, its silence had been vaguely frightening, but now all the fear was inside himself again, he was his own atmosphere, and the atmosphere of the house meant nothing.

Voices followed him about, all talking about Fletton: Fletton, Flettons, Fletton, Flettons; Durdon saying, now

maybe something'll get done; old Lane, trespassing, Mr Lord Fletton; the Rector, when I heard you were coming, I did think –; Gribble, a grand family, Sir Godfrey; Harriet Barnes, something better than your family ever did. Like a great rotten carcass. Godfrey – had something. He was killed just after.

He felt rage grow up at the idea of Godfrey, the other Godfrey, who had been lucky enough to be killed, to be allowed to rest, coolly, in a forgotten grave. Why him and not me, he felt impotently: he had something, I nothing, now he has something more, and I still less. Peace, he felt, clenching his hands until the nails cut the palms: the right to stop fighting; never, never, never, never.

This went on interminably, through vistas of time; it began to grow faintly light, the rain still dropping. He fell asleep about six, wrung out; just after nine he was wakened by Helliwell and the boy. His conversation with them was merely freakish: his commission to young Ted on the spur of the moment, arising out of an instinct to outrage the policeman, partly; partly from an equally instinctive notion that Ted and himself were both in the grip of something blind and malicious and too strong to resist.

He found the flask by the pump about midday, full; young Ted had crept in and gone without disturbing him. He had no idea that the grocer's girl had left the things in the hall; he felt sickly hungry, but did not even contemplate going down to the village again. He stayed himself with a succession of nips from the flask, and during the afternoon began to clear things out of the stables into the yard. He was used to the limit of exertion; he had survived six years in Bad Sachsenhausen on a diet of little more than air and water; his muscles cried out for use. He began to clear the stables in protest against complete aimlessness, and got a dim nervous satisfaction besides, as though the sorting of rubbish were a kind of catharsis.

He had no desire for sleep, and worked on at intervals right through the night, by the light of his torch and an old

lantern, coming on the groceries the following morning when he went through the hall out to the lake. By that time he was not hungry at all, but he ate, perfunctorily, and continued his feverish labour. Goodbrand he disliked at sight; he was prepared to like most people, his outbursts usually being directed against himself and his self-styled stupidity; but the Major's red face and white moustache, his white bristling hair, his barking voice, even his jaunty felt hat with the cord round it, reminded him irresistibly of the old Junker commandant of his first prison camp, with something added – a sahib-to-sahib air of bonhomie that sat on the rest like a revolting hypocrisy. So he was overbearing and callously rude, and sent the Major away cursing under his breath, carrying the unwanted embarrassing bucket he had been forced into buying.

Fletton had just finished when the old man came, the stables swept and garnished and their contents arranged like a museum of antediluvian remains. They included nothing of any apparent value. There was a converted car-engine that drove an antique generating set, and had apparently supplied the house with electricity; he had felt a stirring of interest in this that quickly died; he could not imagine that his prowlings of the two nights before would have been any pleasanter brightly lit. And the job done gave him none of the satisfaction that he had got from the doing. He put a match to the great heap of rubbish outside the forge, but it was too wet to burn. He turned away from it, washed at the pump, and looked for the flask. It was empty.

He ate again, still without enthusiasm, his thoughts on the empty flask. By five o'clock, the desire for whisky had grown into an obsession. He put on his raincoat and turned up the collar, pulled down his hat and went out through the hall. By the front door he found two copies of the *Daily Mail* and two loaves of bread: the unseen ministrant had been continuing her visitations. He left them there, and walked down the drive. At the entrance gates he reconnoitred: the square was deserted under the rain. He crossed rapidly to

the Fletton Arms and tried the door. It was locked; he was wondering whether to knock, when it was opened from inside.

'Saw you through the glass,' George Ames said. 'I was just giving the place a bit of a sweep out.' He gestured with the broom in his hand. 'Come your ways in, Sir Godfrey.' His tone was matter-of-fact, neither especially welcoming nor anything else but friendly. It was exactly right for Fletton: he went in without a thought, into an atmosphere laden with dust. The bar was even less attractive than he had remembered. smelly and full of shadow. Ames closed the door behind him, and locked it. 'What's your pleasure, sir?' he said.

'I wondered,' Fletton said. 'Could you – would it be possible for you to let me have a bottle of whisky?'

'Whisky,' Ames said. 'Sure.' He went behind the bar and bent down, dropping out of sight. 'Johnny Walker or Black and White?' his voice asked.

'Whichever you can spare,' Fletton said. 'And Mr Ames – I feel I owe you an apology.'

Ames reappeared, bottle in hand. 'What for?' he said. He put the bottle on the counter.

'The other night,' Fletton said. 'Not saying who I was. It was –'

'That's all right,' Ames said. 'I knew who you were.'

'You did?' Fletton said.

'Sure,' Ames said. 'I guessed right off. It was your business whether you wanted to say. No need to apologize, Sir Godfrey.'

'Yes there is,' Fletton said. 'And look: do me a favour – don't call me Sir Godfrey. I'm not used to it, and I don't like the sound of it.'

Ames nodded. 'You get a bellyfull of it, I expect,' he said. 'I'll say Captain then. That do?'

'Do fine,' Fletton said, feeling the man's odd friendliness again. 'Now – how much do I owe you?'

'Twenty-five and nine,' the landlord said, and Fletton

took out his wallet. 'The wife's just making a pot of tea. If you could do with a cup.' Fletton hesitated. 'Be a treat for her,' Ames said. 'We don't see many folk.'

'I'd like it,' Fletton said at once.

'Fine,' Ames said. He sorted change from the till. 'Something for her to think about. You know,' he said. 'Come through this way, captain.' He opened a door behind the bar, and stood back. Fletton went through, and the landlord called past him: 'Mary. We've got company to tea, lass.' They groped down a short passage as a woman's voice said: 'Who is it?'

'Captain Fletton,' Ames said. He opened another door, reaching round Fletton. 'From the Hall.'

After the dark passage the room sparkled and glowed at them. It was a kitchen with a great country range, ovens on both sides of a comfortable fire. The range was black-leaded till it shone like lacquer; the steel fender and fire-irons sand-papered to silver in the old-fashioned way. Two Windsor chairs flanked the fire on a rag rug; the table was laid with a white cloth.

'Well, now,' Mary Ames said, 'that is nice. Come right in, Sir Godfrey, and sit down.' She held out her hand; Fletton took it, marvelling at its size: the skin was rough, but the bones as delicate as a bird's. She herself was like a brisk sparrow beside her husband, and apparently much older. Her hair was white.

'This is your husband's doing, Mrs Ames,' Fletton said. 'It's outrageous, really - throwing me at you like this -'

'Nothing of the sort,' she said. 'Give Sir Godfrey a seat, George - standing there gawping.' Ames pushed forward one of the two armchairs; Fletton sat down. 'You're right welcome.' She meant it literally. 'I was just making a bit of toast,' she said, over her shoulder. 'Be done in a minute.'

'No, really,' Fletton began. 'Not for me: just a cup of tea -'

'You could eat a boiled egg, too,' she said. 'Don't tell me you couldn't. There's nothing George likes so much as a

boiled egg for his tea. George,' she said admonishingly. The big man started as if stung; he limped off into the next room.

'I can't impose on you -' Fletton said.

She turned her head and smiled at him. He subsided, and smiled back. 'That's right,' she said, as if he had spoken. Ames came back with a saucepan and three eggs. She poured water into it from the kettle on the hob, and put it on the fire, glancing at the little brass clock on the mantel. Ames pulled a chair out from the table and sat down.

'Mary, lass,' he said.

'Umph?' she said, from the fire.

'The Captain likes to be called captain,' he said. 'Not Sir Godfrey.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't know.'

'Please,' Fletton said. 'It's just a stupid fancy.'

'You've a right to say what you'll be called,' she said. 'I'll remember.' Into the pause Ames said: 'Well, captain. How do you like Fletton?'

'I don't,' Fletton said.

'No,' Ames said. 'Nor anyone else. That's the trouble. You've got to take a pride in a place, to like it.'

'Not much to be proud of, is it?' Fletton said.

'I always say,' Mary Ames said, 'a place is the same as the people that live in it.' Ames winked heavily at Fletton. 'Don't make faces, George,' she said without turning. 'You know very well it's true. You've got to make a place proud of *you* before you can be proud of *it*.' She came round with the plate of toast in her hand. 'There's no talking to him,' she said to Fletton, putting it on the table. 'Stubborn as a mule, that's what he is.'

Fletton laughed. 'I wouldn't have thought so,' he said.

'He does as he's told in my kitchen,' Mrs Ames said, 'if that's what you mean. But outside of that, wild horses wouldn't move him.' She looked at Ames fondly. 'Just because he wasn't made Lord Mayor the minute he set foot in the place -'

'Now then,' Ames said.

'You can't deny it,' she said. She took the eggs off the fire and poured water into the teapot.

'I'll tell you how it was,' Ames said to Fletton. 'Twelve years ago it was – come November –'

'Will you draw up your chair, Captain Fletton?' Mrs Ames said. 'Be quiet, George – the Captain doesn't want to hear your old tales.'

'But I'd like to,' Fletton said. He drew up to the table.

'I'll tell you then,' she said. 'Help yourself to butter, Captain. It takes too long when George starts. We came here twelve years ago, and the village didn't fancy our ways –'

'They called a parish meeting,' George Ames said. 'About me, mind. Just because I liked a bit of life in the place – a piano in the bar and singing, and such: nothing rowdy, mind, just a bit of fun – they called a parish meeting to get my licence taken away. My licence, mind: my living. Wanted no bloody foreigners here, they said –'

'George,' Mrs Ames said.

'– giving the place a bad name. A bad name – me. Scuffling in the dark in the hedge-bottoms, nine out of ten of the kids born out of wedlock – that didn't matter. But singing in my bar – So I thought, bloody foreigner am I – we'll see who's the bloody foreigners –'

'George,' Mrs Ames said again.

'I'm only saying what was said to me, Mary,' he said.

'Oh no you're not,' she said. 'You know I won't have swearing in here. That'll do, now. So you see how it is, Captain,' she said to Fletton. 'He won't move, because he says he won't be driven, and he won't *make* a move, because he says it's their turn next.'

'Well, isn't it?' Ames said.

'There's a lot of chapel folk in the village,' she said in a kind of irrelevant explanation.

'Religious,' Ames said disgustedly. 'So *they* reckon.'

'If you were brought up chapel, Captain –' she said.

'But of course you wouldn't be.' She laughed. 'Look at me, talking and forgetting to pour the tea.'

She took the cosy from the teapot and began to pour out. Fletton watched her, eating his egg, and the crisp toast. He was actually enjoying himself, and enjoying the food. 'They didn't do it though,' he said to Ames. 'The licence thing, I mean.'

'They did *not*,' Ames said. 'The brewery backed me. I've a pull with them. My leg, you know.' He patted it. 'It wasn't for want of trying, blast them.'

'George,' Mrs Ames said. 'Are you staying here long, Captain Fletton?'

'I don't know,' Fletton said. 'I meant to, but – I don't know.'

They both looked at him sympathetically, but said nothing. He felt impelled to go on

'It's all a question of money,' he said. 'I've a bit – not much, you know, just a bit. My father died during the war, so I've no one to bother about but myself. Then the Hall fell into my lap, and I thought perhaps I could make enough to keep myself out of the estate. I didn't fancy my old job. Now – I don't know.'

'It's in a bad way,' Ames said. 'Been let go for years. But I've often thought all those greenhouses could be done something with. Market stuff: you know – tomatoes and such.'

'It's an idea,' Fletton said. It was a new idea to him. 'You'd want fuel though – for the winter, wouldn't you?'

'You'd get a permit,' Ames said. 'If it was for food. And even if you didn't, there's other ways. We never go short. No black market, mind – nothing like that. It's a kind of local industry – picking over the mine heaps for scrap.'

'Oh,' Fletton said. 'That's interesting.'

'Aye,' Ames said. 'I can tell you who to go to, too: young – What's his name, Mary?'

'Ted Sloan,' Mrs Ames said.

'That's it,' Ames said. 'Ted Sloan – the lad you sent for the whisky, Captain.'

'I know,' Fletton said. 'So young Ted's in the coal business. Bit of a go-getter, is he?'

'Bit of everything, I reckon,' Ames said. 'Always out to turn a penny, anyway.'

'He's a thorough young scamp,' Mrs Ames said.

'Oh, I don't know,' Ames said. 'He's a bit wild, but who isn't, that age? I was.'

'Go on,' she said. 'Wild. You were born honest, and that's what counts.'

'Who isn't?' Ames said again.

'You don't believe in original sin?' Fletton said.

'Never heard of it,' Ames said. 'What's original about sin? And come to that, what's sin? What some other fellow doesn't like, usually. I'm not so sure I believe in that, either.'

'You'd think it was the devil himself talking,' Mrs Ames said to Fletton. 'Don't take any notice of him, Captain. Another cup of tea?'

'Thanks,' Fletton said. 'I will.' He passed his cup. 'You don't think it comes down then – sin, I mean – father to son?'

'Not it,' Ames said.

'Mr Lane thinks so,' Fletton said. 'You know – at Dimfold. And I'm not so sure Miss Barnes doesn't think it too. They'd both got it in for me, anyway, before they ever set eyes on me.'

'Oh, you've come across them, have you?' Ames said. 'Well, old Lane's a bit cracked: a good farmer, but you know the way countryfolk get, sometimes. And I won't say he hasn't got a handful in Jack. Miss Harriet: she's a bonny lass, but young – got a lot to learn they don't teach in schools.'

'Now, George,' Mrs Ames said.

He grinned. 'Mary was a schoolteacher when I married her,' he said. 'That's how I know. Been teaching me ever since.'

'You'll never learn,' she said in comic disgust.

'I'm a slow study,' he said. He winked at Fletton, who laughed.

'Look,' he said. 'Tell me – what's old Lane got against the Flettons?'

'Oh that,' Ames said. 'He was sweet on one of the Fletton girls – forty or fifty years back, I should think. I never properly got at the rights of it. Ancient history it ought to be, but he's never been let forget it. They're a sweet lot in this village, as I said.'

'She swore he assaulted her,' Mary Ames said. 'But a lot thought it was just a story, and that she led him on.'

'Here,' Ames said. 'How do you know that?'

'Never mind,' she said.

'But you never told me,' he said.

'It's the kind of story you can do without,' she said calmly. 'I wouldn't say anything now, but if Mr Lane's been going for Captain Fletton, he's a right to know.'

'I'll be damned,' Ames said. He scratched his head and sat looking at her.

'But what happened?' Fletton said, smiling. 'To old Lane, I mean.'

'The old squire ordered him off,' Mrs Ames said. 'He was under-groom, or something, round the stables up at the Hall – he'd be about twenty or less, I expect, and her a lot older: anyway, as I say, the old squire threatened him, took a whip to him, some say, in front of all the men. He couldn't even answer back – his father had the Home Farm, and he was only a lad.'

'Good God,' Fletton said. 'No wonder he's sore still.'

'No,' Mrs Ames said. 'That's another reason I thought you ought to know.' Ames began to laugh. 'What is it now?' she said.

'Never you mind,' he said.

'Fifty years ago,' Fletton said. 'That would be –' He calculated. 'Good Lord. It'd be the same old boy that threw my grandfather out on his ear – my great-grandfather. First

his son off the rails, then his daughter. So old Lane got it in the neck. Well, well. Happy days.' He was silent for a moment, and then said: 'Seems pretty silly, doesn't it?'

'Except to Mr Lane,' Mary Ames said. 'And now he's got to deliver your milk.'

Fletton stared at her. 'What milk?' he said.

'You had to register with Dimfold, didn't you?' she said.

'O Lord, yes,' he said. 'And I haven't had any milk. It hadn't struck me, but that's why, then.'

'Why don't you get Sue Gribble to bring it up?' she said. 'And your meat, too. It wouldn't be any trouble.'

'Who's Sue Gribble?' he asked.

'Gribble's daughter,' she said. 'The grocer – the girl who brings your paper and things.'

'Oh,' he said. 'That's who it is. But Gribble doesn't sell meat, does he?'

She laughed. 'Don't tell me you haven't ordered meat either,' she said.

'I never thought of it,' he confessed.

She shook her head. 'What you want is a housekeeper, Captain,' she said. 'You can't live like that – starving yourself.'

'I'm not starving,' he said. 'I just don't pay much attention to what I eat, that's all.' He grinned boyishly. 'And I certainly wouldn't know what to do with a housekeeper.'

'Well, look,' she said. 'If you like I'll see Jukes about your meat, and get Mr Lane to deliver the milk here. Then Sue can bring them both up with her.'

'That's more than kind of you,' he said gratefully. 'I must say I don't fancy tackling either of them.'

'Just leave it to me,' she said. 'You can pay her too.'

'That's really grand,' he said. He pushed back his chair. 'Well, I ought to go now. And you don't know – I can't say how much I've enjoyed –'

'Just a cup of tea?' she said. 'You must come again, Captain Fletton.'

'It was much more,' he said. 'And I will, sure.'

He stood up. Ames preceded him down the passage, then drew back for him to pass through the bar. 'Your whisky, Captain,' he said. He held out the bottle. 'You're forgetting your whisky.'

'So I was,' Fletton said. He put it in his pocket.

At the door Ames chuckled. 'Funny,' he said. 'Bloody funny. You know when I was laughing – in there. It just struck me – Jack Lane's got two affiliation orders out against him to my certain knowledge. And I said I didn't believe in like father like son.' He laughed silently.

He went back to the Hall much more cheerful, smiling at the thought of the affable Jack. Friendly, he thought: too friendly by half. Extraordinary how you can talk to someone and not get the faintest notion of what they're really like. Lecherous young devil – that disarming grin. Disarming is right. And the old man, with that story back of him, and the whole countryside laughing, whispering: like father like son. God, no wonder he gave me the welcome he did.

He thought, for no particular reason, of the odd look on the old man's face, staring across the gate of his field, himself inside, Fletton safely out. He was pleased, he thought, that's what it was: so pleased that for two pins he'd have laughed outright. I'd provided him with such a lovely sequel to that old business that with the slightest encouragement he'd have taken me to his bosom. Perhaps when he's had a chance to get the full taste of it he'll be ready to make friends. I'd like to be friends with the old boy, he thought –

And if he tries it the odds are I'll spit in his face.

O God, he thought, what am I? Which is me? I think my thoughts of other people – what in hell do they think of me? How do they see me? How can they see me at all when I can't see myself? Neurosis, the doctor said. Nerves. My foot. My nerves are all right. It's my mind that's wrong: broken, decayed – anything you like. At four o'clock I'm in hell. I've one thought: whisky to drink myself blind; then a cup of tea and a boiled egg, and at six I'm up again, top of the

world, patronizing my neighbours, forgiving my enemies, making friends right and left, no stability, no direction, no reason, no control.

One day, as the alternations grow quicker and the changes dizzier, you'll go mad, you'll be loony, you'll babble, and you won't know, you won't care. You can watch it happening, but when it's happened, you won't know. Then you'll be happy, because that's what happiness is – not knowing, not caring.

But although he said these things to himself, it was more by way of shocking himself into sense than because he truly believed them at that moment. When he reached home – the room above the stable was now home – he took the bottle of whisky from his pocket and considered it, then put it down on the floor by his bed of hay. It was not self-denial, he just did not fancy it. Instead he climbed back down the ladder and went across the yard into the greenhouses.

The rain whispered on the panes of the roof, but inside the air was still and warm and stagnant, with a greenish reedy smell. The little green berries on the old vine were shrivelling without ripening; beyond it the houses stretched away in a perspective of converging lines. Shelves ran along the glass on the outer side ; the inner was the wall of the stables, rough whitewashed brick, from which the heat of forgotten suns seemed to radiate. Doors separated the different houses one from another; each had its own stove, its own system of black rusted pipes; each was shelved in a different way for different growth. He did not know what their uses were, but respected the thought that had gone into them, walking down the long avenue of glass, opening door beyond door, thinking, could be. He was thinking of Ames' suggestion: I don't know, he thought, but I'll swear you could grow any damned thing you liked in here. For a moment his imagination surrounded him with lush plants on which tomatoes flamed like lamps; then he came to the corner and turned it, to be met by another vista of cobwebby white paint and grimy glass. He was now for the first

time behind the stables, in new country. He leaned forward on the shelving, and with his face close to the panes peered through the wavering streaming lines of rain.

He was looking at what appeared to be an orchard; gnarled and ancient trees, lopsided and askew, a number of them down, branches trailing. On one of the nearest he could see fruit, either apples or pears. It excited him just as if he had been a small boy: the thought of eating fruit straight from the tree was inexpressibly alluring. He started forward again; there was a door in the outer wall a little way down, locked. He struggled with the key, cutting his hands on its sharp rusty edges, and turned it with a great effort. The door opened, creaking, and the lower hinge parted company from the wood of the jamb. He bit his lip; then pushed through the wet and matted grass to the tree

It was a pear tree; the fruit on it small and misshapen, the ground beneath it covered with windfalls and loud with wasps. Not to be disappointed, he picked the best fruit he could see and bit into it. It was tasteless and woody; as he looked at it a large pallid grub edged its way furtively back into the core. He threw it away and spat disgustedly. My God, he thought, what a place. *Everything* about it's rotten as hell.

He put his hands in his pockets and began to walk back along the outside of the greenhouses. As he went the ground fell away to his right, at first gradually and then more steeply, covered with a wild tangle of vegetation, quiet under the rain. He came to the top of the first stairway and stood there.

If country folk grow queer, the way Ames said, he thought, I was cut out for the country, all right. Here I am after nearly a week, and haven't even explored the place yet. His eyes wandered to the house, and away again; its heavy emptiness, in the soft evening light, held no attraction. I'm sick of dusty junk after the last two days, he explained to himself; it can wait; if there's any living to be made out of this damned hole, it'll be outside and not in. He went

down the slippery mossy steps, wondering again what the gardens had been like in the moneyed days; quiet respectful gardeners, smooth lawns, and brilliant flowers; deer, possibly, under the trees. But devilish little happiness even then, he thought: sons disinherited and daughters seducing the farmer's boy –

He pushed his way along the path which was like every other path in Fletton, overgrown almost beyond recognition. If anything's ever to be done with it, he thought, the ground's got to be cleared so that I can see what's underneath. It means work, but that's better than thinking. Clear the place first, and think afterwards. Perhaps by the time I've done I'll know what to do next.

The path turned abruptly and opened on to what had been, apparently, a circular lawn surrounded by tall dark trees, which formed the head of a little valley. In the centre of the circle a small ruined tower of grey stone adjoined the remains of a gothic arch; an arched doorway in the tower itself looked down the valley. He walked round it, thinking: God, that's old. What's it been? – an old church: a monastery? He approached it, and peered in through the door. Inside, dimly, he made out a bench, a wheelbarrow, and a stack of garden tools, including a scythe. He went in, looking up instinctively at the sky, but there was no sky, only darkness, implying a sound roof. He pulled down the scythe and sat on the bench to examine it. The blade was washed red with rust, and notched, but the handle was sound. I can bring that up on the grindstone in the forge, he thought, hefting it in his hands. I'll clear the path to here first, and then the valley. I like it here.

He leaned the scythe back against the wall, and lit a cigarette, relaxed and at ease. Funny, he thought, staring out into the rain: did the bloke who brought these in here for the last time *know* it was the last time? And did he go off up the path and the stairway, looking back and thinking well, I shan't see you again? Or did he –?

He shivered slightly, feeling suddenly as though he were

being watched. The sensation was so strong that he went outside; but he could see no one, hear nothing. He came back into the tower and sat down again. There was a stone slab under his feet: he scraped a foot idly across it, and saw lettering engraved on it. He cleared it roughly and bent down. HIC JACET, it began; his Latin ran so far and no further; but it was undoubtedly a gravestone, and under it the body of still another Godfrey Fletton had been lying since 1762; 1698-1762: sixty-four years old when he died, and been there a hundred and eighty-four years.

Fletton went back to the house carrying the scythe and thinking: like father, like son. Fletton like Fletton, in spite of George Ames. There's been other queer ones in the family then. It was the first time his family had given him any comfort or support; it was a good place to choose, he thought; good for old Godfrey, whoever he was.

Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder, unable to rid himself of the feeling that he was under observation.

He began the work of clearance in earnest on Thursday. He had sharpened the scythe on his grindstone, collected wheelbarrow, spade, billhook, and rake, and had almost cleared the stairway itself before Sue Gribble arrived with the *Daily Mail*, the loaf of bread, and the milk – but not the meat: Jukes came later, to go away with curiosity unappeased. The other things were there in the hall when he came back to the house for breakfast about nine o'clock; he thought kindly of Mrs Ames, and even of the unknown Sue. He gave little time to eating, and pressed on; the scythe tired him, and cut poorly, so that he soon gave it up in favour of the billhook, on his hands and knees. He hacked out a rough surface on the path, cut back the two banks, and to about a foot under the bushes immediately edging them.

By Friday night he was three-quarters of the way to the chapel; on Saturday morning he sat on the steps and surveyed the result. He was not pleased. The path had a raw and painful look, full of holes and littered with assorted

stones; the banks were ragged, and where the green had been cut away they were clothed with a grey unappetizing mat of dead grass. Aesthetically it was far from being an improvement; he tried to see it as it would be, trim and cared for, and failed, with a sickening sense of disappointment. He scowled. Somebody coughed behind him.

A little old woman was standing at the top of the steps. She looked down on him grimly, with determination. He stared back unfavourably, feeling at a disadvantage below her, and began to walk up the stair. She said, as if he had already contradicted her, 'Tha'll be Sir Godfrey Fletton.'

'I am,' he said.

'It's thee I'm wanting, then,' she said.

Level with her, and then above her, he received an impression of fierce respectability. The shape of her hat was no shape, but it was transfixed and held, rigidly, by a hat-pin with a knob of jet; her shoes were cracked and incredibly over at the heels, but they shone like the jet of the pin; her hands were inlaid with a fine dark pattern of lines, the nails broken, but the dirt was under the skin and ineradicable, the skin scrubbed and shining with soap. Her eyes were a faded blue; a little cluster of white hairs on her chin caught the light.

'Well?' he said.

'It's our Ted,' she said.

He shook his head. 'I'm sorry,' he began.

'Ted Sloan,' she said, and saw understanding come into his face. 'Aye, him,' she said.

'You're Mrs Sloan?' he said.

'I am,' she said, with a kind of defiance. 'I told him to come and see thee, and he came, but he'd not brass enough to speak. So I browt him mysen.' She looked round. 'Ted,' she called. 'Ted Sloan.' The tall youth appeared round the corner of the house, and advanced sheepishly. 'Aye, there he is,' she said. She watched her son approach, with compressed lips. 'Now then,' she said to him, 'thank Sir Godfrey.'

The boy mumbled and scraped his foot. His face was scarlet.

She made a little sound of angry impatience. 'He's tongue enough when it's not wanted,' she said. 'He says thank you for standing his friend with the constable.'

'I don't -' Fletton said.

'He says,' she said, 'if there's any jobs to be done, he'll do 'em.'

'That's very kind, Mrs Sloan,' Fletton said. 'But -'

'We want no favours,' she said. 'The like of us can't afford 'em. So if there's any sticks to chop?' She looked down the stairway. 'Or a bit of digging?'

'Well,' Fletton began.

'That's it,' she said. 'Ted. Get thi jacket off.' Still without raising his eyes, young Ted started down the stair. 'That's it,' she said again. 'He's a good lad,' she said in a softer tone. 'But I'll have manners or nowt. He mun learn.'

'That's all very well,' Fletton said. He was more than half amused at the way he was being put to rights. 'But really, I don't want any help -'

'Flettons is gentry,' she said. 'And gentry pays back debts and lets other folk pay theirs.' She looked at him enquiringly.

'Oh well,' he said. 'If you feel like that, Mrs Sloan -'

'I do an' all,' she said. 'I'm not thanking thee, Sir Godfrey. Thanks never filled a poor man's belly - nor a rich 'un's neither, come to that. But if I can mek thi bed before I go, or if tha's a shirt or two to wash -'

'Now look here,' Fletton said. 'You're not under any obligation to me. I did nothing that anyone else wouldn't have done -'

'Tha knows better,' she said. 'And so do I. Tha won't cross an owd woman, will ta?'

He could not. She looked down at him disapprovingly from the little window. 'Is this thi bed?' she asked. He said it was, and she disappeared. A moment later his raincoat appeared through the window. She shook it vigorously and disappeared again. She came undauntedly down the ladder

and asked for pail, soap, and scrubbing brush. She went off at last with a shirt, two pairs of socks, and a handkerchief. Ted should bring them back Monday, she said, and she herself would be back – with her own scrubbing brush. The last seemed to be a mixture of reproof and threat.

She left Fletton scratching his head. He did not know whether he was really amused, or more annoyed. Which-ever it was, there was nothing he could do. His determination was no match for hers, so he scratched his head, and went back to the top of the stair: Ted was making great play with the scythe; he seemed to have the knack that had eluded Fletton himself. He watched for a moment; then a thought struck him. He descended the stairs, and said to the boy: 'Were you up here Thursday?'

'Aye,' the boy said, without looking up.

'It was you watching me from the bushes then,' Fletton said

The boy flushed deeply. He mumbled something.

'Show me how you work that thing,' Fletton said. 'Come on

Ted straightened himself and looked at him. 'Aye,' he said, croaking. He cleared his throat, 'It's like this,' he brought out loudly. 'You tek hold here, and here –'

Chapter Seven

*

AT the end of September Fletton would have had difficulty in expressing his stay at the Hall in terms of time. The days passed; the weeks accumulated almost unnoticed. In Sachsenhausen days had been recorded surreptitiously, scratched on a board and counted over like gold coins. Time had hung over the camp like a cloud, throwing its painfully moving shadow before and after. In Fletton there was no time; there was the day the path to the chapel was cleared, the day they swept the flues in the greenhouses, other days like ripples on the sand of a boundless and uncharted desert, but no time.

Sue Gribble brought the paper seven times a week; a neat pile of them lay in the forge, in their original folds, unread. There was an odd neatness about other unrelated items in the Fletton economy, those on which Mrs Sloan was able to wreak undisturbed her passionate will for cleanliness and order. Where Fletton himself, or Ted, were likely to be interested, her labours went for nothing; she built dykes of mud against a flood of disorder, coming nearly every night when she had done at the Rectory, and on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, indomitably sweeping, tidying, washing. Sometimes she saw Fletton, more often not. He had accepted her service unwillingly at first, with an exasperated amusement in his better moments, a black and bitter irritation at others; neither amusement nor irritation so much as scratched the surface of her determination, and he grew used to her. He paid her spasmodically and she accepted payment without thanks. He thought nothing of this, but she thought a good deal; it was all clear in her mind – the first fortnight's service free, in gratitude: not as commensurate with the favour he had done her, but as the utmost she could afford; after that, a loyalty and devotion

of which he had no idea, and a just but small payment by the hour for the rest. She kept a careful account, in an exercise book, of the hours spent; the money was more than useful to her; bit by bit she had begun to pay off her debt to Gribble.

Ted came and went at all hours. He was shy and secretive, as wild and wily as a fox: in a countryside where everyone knew the other's business, he kept himself to himself; would be seen occasionally here and there by those who got about, though it was seldom possible to link his appearances into a semblance of a connected plan. In this he took after his father, a gypsyish individual, day-labourer-cum-huckster-cum-poacher, who had been found face downward one rainy morning in a green ditch, after a spree in Stewbury. Like his father, too, Ted was at once fond and terrified of his mother, giving her money when he had it, and when it seemed likely that she would accept his possession of it without overmuch questioning.

In Ted's mind Fletton occupied roughly the same place as God in the Rector's mind. This was not so much because Fletton had, as Ted put it, 'fair choked off' the constable; his admiration would have been no less if Fletton's evidence had planted him in gaol; he loved Fletton from the moment he saw him with one of those flashing and inexplicable passions to which adolescence lies wide open. He came and went silently, taking Fletton's indifference as just another godlike attribute; he performed casual and unmentioned services, bringing a pailful of coal pickings on nearly every visit, using his considerable influence with the youth of the village to keep the Hall grounds free of trespass, and besides these doing a great deal of solid work. This was his mother's side of Ted; where Fletton was subject to evanescent, soon exhausted spells of enthusiasm, Ted, when his loyalty was engaged, and there was no compulsion against which to rebel, would plod on hour by hour, finishing jobs which otherwise would have been dropped and forgotten almost before they were begun. So the chapel path was cleared,

and its side-branch round to the lake, and the chapel valley was cleared and almost dug; and the summer slipped away, while Fletton moved about his inheritance like a man held fast in a dream of his own deliberate creation.

He had, in fact, given up; the effort required to get to Fletton, the nervous exhaustion of settling in, had finally defeated him. He worked hard, in spurts; and drank, not much at a time, but continuously. He did not repeat his social visit to the Ames', because of an unexamined conviction that he had let down his defences and made something of a fool of himself. But he was no longer afraid of going down into the village, though he went less and less often; to the Fletton Arms for liquor, and once a month to the bank for funds. He was no longer consciously afraid of anything, even of himself; he used the Sloans as a protection, work and whisky as anodynes, and eschewed thought.

A net of fine vines began to appear round his nostrils; his hand trembled, lighting a cigarette. He nursed his mind as a man with an aneurism nurses his heart. He cut himself off from living. He forgot, among other things, that to do a favour is more dangerous than to accept one, and that a dependant is more dangerous than dependence.

He was sitting on the top step of the main stairway, staring down idly at the lake, smoking, when he heard voices. It was mid-afternoon, everything still except for the whisper of the leaves in the trees below him. He was so used to solitude that in the first moment he thought automatically, Mrs Sloan and Ted. Then, realizing that at that time it could not be Mrs Sloan, he leaned backwards to look round the balustrade.

Two women were coming up the drive at the far end of the terrace. As he looked the sun, shining momentarily from behind a cloud, struck sparks from the bright head of one. There was no doubt as to who it was; he withdrew hastily, completely disconcerted. His first impulse was to take up the flask from the step beside him, and run; but he realized

that there was nowhere he could run without being seen, and decided to stay where he was. Hunched over his knees, he put the flask to his lips and tilted it, then remembered it was empty. Damn, he said silently, and replaced it very carefully on the step. He stared at the lake, listening, and thought suddenly: Of course it was her – the girl in the lake. With her butter-wouldn't-melt airs. He had not thought of the water-nymph for months, but now it gave him a flooding satisfaction, as though he had caught her out in some misdemeanour. It armoured him, temporarily; he stood up and called 'Hello there,' and waited while they came towards him.

He was smiling, Harriet Barnes saw. The smile affected her unpleasantly; it was unexpected, not what she had looked for; she detected mockery in it, and felt her face begin to burn. She had not wanted to come; she had known how it would be; but Mrs Winnington-Jones –

'Mrs Winnington-Jones,' she said. 'This is Sir Godfrey Fletton.'

'How do you do,' the other woman said, contralto. She held out her hand. Fletton took it and bowed over it. 'Mrs. –?' he said, and looked up, sideways, at Harriet.

'Mrs Winnington-Jones,' Harriet said clearly.

He repeated it, bowing again, and kicked over the flask. 'Excuse me,' he said. He picked it up and upended it airily. 'So sorry,' he said. 'Just too late.'

Mrs Winnington-Jones emitted a little neigh of laughter. 'Why, Harriet,' she said. 'He's *charming*.' She turned to Fletton. 'I've been so wanting to meet you, Sir Godfrey,' she said. 'I knew your cousin – I knew Sir Godfrey –' She broke off.

'Confusing, isn't it?' he said. 'But don't worry: you've the advantage of me, anyway. I didn't know him at all.'

She laughed again. 'I've been wanting to meet you for *ages*,' she said. 'But you know how things are –'

'Mrs Winnington-Jones only came back yesterday,' Harriet said.

'I was just going to say,' she said reproachfully. 'Sir Godfrey will think I've come dashing up here the first moment -'

'Oh no,' he said.

'Nice man,' she said. She laid a plump hand on his arm. 'Do go on saying nice things. So refreshing in this horrid socialistic age.'

'Mrs Winnington-Jones is chairman of the W.I.,' Harriet said.

'I was just going to say,' she said.

'W.I.?' Fletton said.

'The Women's Institute,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said. 'And Harriet is our clever secretary. And as soon as I found out that here they are half-way through the bottling season and nothing whatever done about the Hall -'

'Katherine,' Harriet said. 'Sir Godfrey hasn't the slightest idea what you're talking about, I'm certain.'

'Well, you tell him then, my dear,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said pettishly. She turned away and leaned on the balustrade.

'Oh, do,' Fletton said, suddenly angry.

'They - the Women's Institute,' Harriet said in a rapid monotone, '- bottle fruit every year. They've done the Hall fruit right through the war -'

'Such busy creatures,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said, turning. 'Really, as busy as bees. So admirable, I think, don't you?'

'Admirable,' Fletton agreed, in a repressed tone.

'They had permission from the estate,' Harriet said. 'But of course this year I said -'

'And I didn't agree,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said. 'I simply *knew* you wouldn't mind, Sir Godfrey. You wouldn't, would you?'

'Mind?' Fletton said. 'Why should I?'

'There,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said triumphantly, to Harriet. 'You see.'

'If I'd only known,' Fletton said with exaggerated

regret. 'But - I'm terribly sorry - it's all bottled, already.'

'It's -' Harriet began.

He nodded. 'All done,' he said. 'My woman - you know Mrs Sloan: another admirably busy creature,' he said in parenthesis - 'gave me no peace at all -'

'Oh,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said. 'Oh, *dear*. There,' she said to Harriet, 'we've lost it -'

'Too bad, isn't it?' Fletton said.

'Then that's all there is to be said,' Harriet said. 'Good-bye, Sir Godfrey. Come along, Katherine.'

But Mrs Winnington-Jones was not done. 'I've so enjoyed our little talk, Sir Godfrey,' she said, holding his hand. 'You must come to tea. No, I won't let you say no. Any Thursday. You will, won't you? You mustn't be lonely, you know.'

'Lonely?' he said. 'My dear Mrs Winnington-Jones, I am never lonely, I assure you. People come, you know - to talk, and look round, to swim, in the lake -' He glanced at Harriet. She looked back with an expression of dislike that was almost contemptuous.

'But you will come?' Mrs Winnington-Jones said. 'Soon?'

'But of course,' he said. He bowed over her hand.

They left him standing, looking after them. At the end of the terrace she turned and waved. He did not wave back, but she did not mind.

'You see how wrong you were,' she said in a satisfied tone.

'Wrong,' Harriet said. 'He is the most hateful man - I told you what it would be -' She was almost in tears.

'Oh nonsense,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said again. Harriet did not answer. Half-way down the drive Mrs Winnington-Jones said reflectively: 'I must say I do admire a good leg in a good legging.' Again Harriet did not answer. Outside in the Square they met Mrs Sloan. Harriet stopped her.

'How many bottles of fruit have you put up for Sir Godfrey, Mrs Sloan?' she asked.

'Bottles of fruit?' the little woman said. 'I've bottled no fruit. It's rotting on t' trees.'

Harriet looked at Mrs Winnington-Jones.

'How wrong I was,' she said.

'I can't – I can't believe it,' her friend said. 'He –'

'He was drunk,' Harriet said.

'Oh no,' Mrs Winnington-Jones said. 'I *won't* believe that –' Her eyes fell on Mrs Sloan.

'No good looking at me, mum,' Mrs Sloan said. 'It's nowt to do wi' me. If he was, he's nobbut hisself to please.'

She plodded on into the park.

She saw nothing of Fletton about the stables of the Hall; he was digging like a madman in the chapel field, muttering under his breath. Insufferable, he thought – bringing that fat bitch to leer at me. You musn't be lonely, you know, he mocked bitterly, twisting his mouth. What does she think I am – a fountain of good works, or just a plain bloody fool? I should have thought I made it clear enough the last time –

He worked till his head was bursting and his mouth parched, then went back to the stables and finished what whisky he had. At six he presented himself at the Fletton Arms, bought a new bottle, and for the first time since the night of his arrival had a drink in the bar; and another.

'I'm out of sorts, George,' he had the grace to say to George Ames. 'Sometimes this bloody world gets me down. This is one of the times.'

Ames nodded. 'Sure, Captain,' he said. Fletton's appearance, dishevelled and dirty, disturbed him; but he had seen men come back from two wars and had a natural fund of understanding. He kept a watchful eye on him, then and later, when a few people came in and Fletton retired to a corner, where he drank a great deal before he left at about half-past nine. What he drank had no particular outward effect; he said good night to Ames normally enough, pausing at the door to belt his raincoat round him. Ames was relieved that he had gone without trouble.

It was when he stepped into the cool dusk that it took hold of him. The cobbles of the Square plunged and

rocked; he staggered, brought up with a little tottering run, and stood swaying, eyes closed, smiling foolishly. I'm drunk, he thought, with a kind of luxurious pride. It seemed a sufficient answer to everything; to Harriet and Mrs Winnington-Jones; to the war and the peace; to the guards at Sachsenhausen; even, when he came to think of it, to Sydney Thackel. He repeated it aloud: drunk; that's what I am; bloody, stinking drunk. He opened his eyes, glimpsed the tree-lined wall of the park, and the gates, swinging past him, and staggered again. He laughed. Can't fool me, he said, oh no. He extended one arm and lurched towards the gates; collided with someone and nearly fell, would have fallen if the woman had not held him and steadied him on his feet.

He drew himself upright with some dignity, saw that it was a woman, and smiled very affably. 'Hallo,' he said.

'Hallo,' she said.

'Mrs Winnington-Jones, I believe?' he said, mangling the name horribly. His fingers fumbled with his hat.

She laughed. 'Not me,' she said.

He peered at her through the whisky fumes. 'No,' he said. 'You're not. I apologize – humbly apologize. She's a bitch.'

She laughed again. 'Go on,' she said. 'You don't say.'

'But I do say,' he said solemnly. 'She's a fat bitch – can't stand her.' He came nearer, and put a hand on her arm. 'But I like you,' he said.

'Funny boy,' she said.

'It's a fact,' he said. 'I like you – I like you a lot. Come and have a drink.' He took hold of her arm and half turned.

'In there?' she said. 'You've had it, duck. He'd never serve you – not the way you are.'

He considered this. 'No,' he said. 'That's right. I'm drunk.'

'Are you telling me?' she said.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'Know what I've got?' He pulled at the bottle of whisky in his pocket, exhibiting the

cork and the top of the neck. 'See? C'mon home and have a drink.'

'Do you mean that?' she said.

'Course I mean it,' he said. 'What's a matter? Don't you want a drink?'

'Sure,' she said. 'Come on then.'

She took his arm and guided him across the Square, taking his weight goodhumouredly as he stumbled.

'What's your name?' he said.

'Betty,' she said. 'Betty Walsh.' In her mind it was spelt 'Bette'; she thought Betty common.

'Betty,' he said. 'Nice name.' He squeezed her hand between his arm and his side. 'Know who I am, Betty?'

'Sure,' she said. 'You're Sir -'

He stopped. 'Don't say it,' he said. 'Bloody handle. Godfrey - that's my name, see?'

'O.K. duck,' she said comfortably. 'Whatever you say.'

They started off again; passed in through the gates, under the trees.

'Coo,' she said. 'It's dark.' She held his arm more tightly. 'You live here all on your own?'

'Sright,' he said.

'I'd be scared,' she said. 'It's spooky.'

'No spooks here,' he said. 'No spooks, no bitches, no lawyers, no interferers. No bloody interference, see?'

She laughed. 'That's right,' she said. 'You tell 'em.'

'Where d'you live?' he said.

'Me?' she said. 'In The Rents.'

He stopped, and faced her. 'The Rents,' he said. 'The Rents, eh? You know who built 'em?'

'No,' she said. 'Who?'

'Flettons,' he said. 'That's who. Flettons built 'em - so I get the blame.'

'Don't be silly,' she said. 'Silly boy.'

'I get the blame,' he said excitedly. 'Is that fair -?'

'Calm down,' she said. 'What blame? No one's blaming you, duck.'

'Oh, yes, they are,' he said.

'Don't be silly,' she said, 'Come on.' She took his arm again; he tripped and fell against her. 'Now then,' she said. 'Steady.'

Ted Sloan said out of the dark: 'What's all t'row? Who's there?'

'Me,' Fletton said. 'Fletton.'

'Oh, it's you, Captain,' Ted said. 'Who's that with you?' In the darkness he sounded assured, manly.

'Friend of mine,' Fletton said. 'Introduce you. Miss - Miss -' He chuckled 'Forgotten,' he said. 'Just Betty.'

'Who?' Ted said. 'You all reight, Captain?' He struck a match; the little flame flared out roundly, lighting up Fletton's foolish grin and the woman holding him. Ted stared. 'Good Christ,' he said. The match went out, leaving a double darkness behind. 'What's t'game?' his voice said dangerously.

'Just going up for a drink,' Fletton said. 'You want a drink, Ted?'

'No,' Ted said. 'I said what's t'game.'

'Suppose you mind your own business,' the woman said.

'Don't worry about my business,' Ted said. 'I know my business all reight. What's *your* business with the Captain?'

'You heard,' she said. 'He asked me -'

'He's drunk,' Ted said.

'That's right,' Fletton said. 'Drunk, that's me.'

'What if he is?' the woman said. 'What's it to you?'

'Plenty,' Ted said. 'Let him go.'

'Go to hell,' she said. 'Think you can tell me what to do, a damned kid like you - ?'

'Think I can't?' he said. There was a brief scuffle, and a crack when he slapped her. Fletton fell.

'You little swine -' she said.

'Now look here,' Fletton said aggrievedly, from the ground.

'Sling it,' Ted said. 'Push off, you mucky cow.'

'I'll get even with you,' she said, sobbing with rage. 'I will. You'll pay for this, Ted Sloan –'

'Try it on,' he said. 'See where it gets you. Come on, Captain, we're going home.'

He felt about for Fletton, and pulled him to his feet. 'That's it,' he said.

'Where's Betty?' Fletton said dazedly.

'Gone to bye-bye,' Ted said. 'Come on, now.'

He took him home, undressed him and put him to bed.

Perhaps that was fortunate, perhaps not. It effectually frightened Mrs Walsh away from the Hall – the Mrs was a harmless fancy – so that when Fletton repeated his performance the following night, there was no question of her accepting his invitation.

He was sitting by the wall, near the gates, nearly asleep and drunker than before. She tripped over his feet, and bent down: it was quite dark.

'Oh, it's you,' she said.

He knew her at once, as if there had been no interruption. 'Hallo,' he said amiably. 'What about li'l drink?'

'Not likely,' she said. 'You got me in enough trouble, sonny boy, you and your little pal. You should see my eye.'

'Eye?' he said. 'What eye? Come on.' He heaved over sideways, in an effort to get up, and sprawled flat. 'Damn,' he said in a smothered tone.

'Get up,' she said. 'You can't lie there like that.' She bent down and twitched his sleeve; he did not move. 'Well, I don't know,' she said. 'Fine state you're in.' She shook him.

'Let me alone,' he said indistinctly.

'Come on now,' she said. 'Get up, do.' Using all her strength, she pulled him to his feet. 'That's better,' she said. She picked up his hat and put it on; he swayed against her. 'Now then,' she said. 'You're all right now. Go home like a good boy.' She faced him in the direction of the gates, and said: 'Know your way now?'

'Sure,' he said, swaying. 'Know my way.'

'Nighty night, then,' she said. She launched him with a little push. He took one step and fell on to his hands and knees.

'O God,' she said. 'I don't know.' She got him to his feet again, fighting his drunkenness in the dark. It began to rain, great heavy drops. He was flaccid in her hands, just able to stand upright. 'I don't know,' she said again. She looked round; the Square was silent and seemed deserted. 'Well, there's only one thing for it,' she said. 'You'll have to come with me. And if we meet that young devil he can have you.'

She took his arm round her shoulders and began to conduct him painfully along the road, half leading, half dragging. In the next twenty minutes she only spoke once. 'Fine old do this is,' she said, with a half humorous bitterness. He seemed to be asleep on his feet; he did not reply. They met no one. She pushed open the door of the hovel she lived in and hoisted him inside, letting him collapse on to a sofa just under the window to the right of the door. He groaned dismally, while she hunted about for matches and lit the lamp. She sat opposite him, breathing hard, hands on knees, knees apart, and surveyed him.

He was lying in a heap, one hand dangling to the floor. She shook her head. 'I don't know,' she said to herself.

A cracked voice called from upstairs: 'Is that thee?'

'Yeah,' she called back. 'It's me. Go to sleep.' She smoothed her hair, which had fallen forward, and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

There was a thud on the floor above, and a sound of shuffling. She half turned and faced the door at the foot of the staircase. Steps descended; an aged man appeared in the doorway.

'Tha's got some'un wi'thee,' he said quaveringly. His head, wrapped in a shawl like an untidy turban, trembled; his bare shins and feet protruded from under his nightgown. He held on to the doorpost and peered about with little sharp bright eyes.

'What if I have?' she said. 'Go back to bed.'

He beat his chest feebly with his free hand. 'Hasn't ta browt enough shame on me?' he said in a petulant whine; the words were obviously habitual and sounded unconvincing. Nevertheless she showed a flash of temper.

'Don't start that,' she said. 'Mind your own bloody business, will you, and go back to bed.'

He took no notice at all, but shuffled forward, spotting Fletton on his couch. He stood looking down at him. 'Yon's a gentleman,' he said incredulously.

She got to her feet. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Looks it, doesn't he?' Her good humour was completely restored. 'Come on,' she said. 'Back to bed before you catch your death.' She smacked him playfully on his withered rump and propelled him toward the stair. He vanished in a querulous grumbling. She watched him up the stair and heard the springs of his bed creak. Fletton groaned, and moved. He sat up as she went back to him; he passed a hand down his face and said almost inaudibly: 'Sick.' His mouth hung open, his head lolled.

She caught on at once. 'Outside then,' she said briskly. 'Not in here.' She pulled him up and helped him out of the door; and held him across the shoulders while he retched into the gutter. The gramophone that seemed to be the spiritual voice of the place was grinding away: 'All the nice girls love a sailor': the cracked and distant voice of a woman singing like a man, with an almost Victorian heartiness. It was still raining; the air was fresh under a superimposed stale odour of sewage. He straightened himself.

'O God,' he said.

'Better?' she said. 'Better out than in, I'd say.' She took him back into the house, and sat him down on his sofa. 'There,' she said. 'A cup of tea's what you want.'

'Where am I?' he said. 'God, my head.'

'No. 1, Palace Mansions,' she said cheerfully. She poked up the fire in the range, and moved the kettle across on to the embers.

'Oh,' he said. He looked at her. 'I know you,' he said.

'I'll say you do,' she said. 'Betty Walsh. Remember?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I think so.' He closed his eyes and leaned back, but sat up again immediately, swallowing down nausea. 'How'd I get here?' he asked.

'The fairies brought you, duck,' she said. 'You were taking a little nap in the middle of the road.'

'Oh,' he said again; and then. 'How long have I been drunk?'

'All questions, you are,' she said. She put tea in the pot from a tin box on the mantel. 'You were drunk last night,' she said. 'You were drunk to-night, and by the looks of you you were drunk in between. Some people know where to get it, I'll say that.'

'O God,' he said. 'I feel terrible.' He belched.

'You look it,' she said. She poured boiling water into the pot. 'Never mind,' she said. 'Tea's coming.'

'You're very kind,' he said.

'Not me,' she said. 'Never know when you might want a hand yourself, do you?'

'You are,' he said. He put his head in his hands. She fussed with tea-cups.

'Here,' she said. 'Drink that.' She held out a cup without a saucer. He looked up.

'I couldn't,' he said.

'Go on,' she ordered. 'Do you good. It's hot.'

He took the cup, and sipped, shuddering. She watched him with an amused look. He finished it in gulps, and dropped his hand, letting the cup dangle between his legs. His eyes closed.

'Look out,' she said sharply. 'Don't you break that.'

He came to with a jerk. 'Sorry,' he said. He reached for the table, miscalculated the distance, and the cup smashed on the stone floor. He stared at it foggily.

Half on her feet, she sank back. 'There,' she said. 'Now look what you've done. My best cup too.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I -'

'All right,' she said. 'Never mind. What's done's done.'

A child cried out, somewhere in the house, a piercing wail.

'What's that?' he said.

'Only Emmy,' she said. 'My little girl.' The child wept bitterly. 'I'd better go up,' she said. At the foot of the stair an idea struck her, and she turned. 'Would you like to see her?' she said, smiling.

'It's late, isn't it?' Fletton said. He did not want to refuse; his head was spinning.

'That's all right,' she said. 'You'll like her. She's ever so pretty.' She went up the stairs. His eyes closed. The old man spoke; the bed springs creaked. 'Go to sleep,' her voice said. When she came down, Fletton himself had drifted off; he was snoring lightly. 'This is my Emmy,' she said proudly.

He woke and blinked at the child in her arms. 'It's – it's black,' he said stupidly. The child had crinkly hair, flat nose, thick negroid lips; its face was smudged with tears.

'She's dark,' the mother said, offended. 'Her father was dark. So what?'

'Nothing,' Fletton said. The situation was rather beyond him. 'I – She is pretty,' he said gently.

'Good as gold, too,' the mother said. She sat down with the child in her lap. 'Takes after her daddy – don't you, duck?' She smoothed the child's wiry hair, and it looked up at her with dark-brown eyes. 'He was a good man,' she said. 'You know, ever so quiet like – and kind. Abraham, his name was. Sounds Jewish, doesn't it? But he wasn't.' She settled the child on her knee. 'He was a good man,' she said again. 'I tell you straight, he was the only man that ever treated me decent. He'd have married me, too, but he couldn't. You know how it is. His folks wouldn't have liked it. He was a sergeant in the American army.' She sniffed. 'He still sends me things,' she said. 'Money and all.'

Fletton snored softly.

'He's asleep,' she said to the child. 'What you and me ought to be, duck.' She got up, and holding the child on her hip, pulled Fletton's legs on to the sofa, straightening him out. 'He'll do till morning,' she said. She put out the lamp

and went upstairs. Fletton slept heavily, a sleep that was more like a stupor.

He was still asleep when she came down, though he had moved during the night and seemed to be adhering to the sofa by a miracle. The room stank of whisky. She raised his head so that he lay more easily; he woke and looked at her. She looked back. 'Well?' she said at last.

He screwed up his eyes; then dropped his feet to the floor and sat up. 'God, no,' he said. He put his head in his hands.

'What d'you expect?' she said unsympathetically. 'Want a cup of tea?'

'No,' he said. 'Thanks.' He passed his tongue over his palate and grimaced. 'You haven't any whisky?' he said.

'Me?' she said. She laughed. 'The way you soak it up there's not much left for the like of me.'

'All right,' he said. 'All right. I just asked.' He stood up, slowly, holding his head steady. 'Well,' he said. 'I'll go. And thanks – for what you did last night.'

'Don't thank me,' she said, 'I told you – you never know: it might be you next time, that's what I always say.' She opened the door and looked out. 'All right,' she said. 'Sooner you go the better. Makes no odds to me, but it won't do you any good if your friends get wind you've been here all night.'

He stepped outside and drew himself erect. 'Well,' he said. 'Thanks again, all the same.'

'O.K., duck,' she said. 'Have it your own way.' And then: 'O God, that's torn it.' She withdrew and closed the door. He looked round. Mrs Winnington-Jones, basket on arm, had just come out of the next house. She passed him without a word, her eyes apparently fixed on some distant object.

He shambled off in the opposite direction, half-conscious of a desire to skulk in the shadows, but feeling too ill to bother.

He swam in the lake; ate two dry biscuits, swallowed, shuddering, a nip of whisky, and went to bed again. When

he came to, the sun had passed through south to west; it was about four. He got up automatically and went down into the yard. His devils had gone, for the moment, their place taken by – absolutely nothing. He had no desire for liquor, no desire for anything. There were no voices this time; no thoughts even; no despair, just depression, mindless, horrible, and still. He was an animated image whose animation was completely purposeless.

George Ames found him sitting on the edge of the water-trough, looking into a void. 'Ah, there you are, Captain,' he said. His manner was painfully ill at ease, in sharp contrast to his normal casual assurance. Fletton did not look up. 'We haven't seen you to tea lately,' Ames said. 'I just came up to ask you –'

'No,' Fletton said.

'Well, no harm in asking,' Ames said. He looked round for something to sit on; found a box, and dragged it forward. He sat down. 'Bit of a pull, up that drive,' he said. He took out a handkerchief, removed his hat and wiped his brow. 'Haven't walked so far in years.'

'What do you want?' Fletton said dully.

'I told you,' Ames said.

'The answer is no,' Fletton said. 'Now go away, will you?'

'Not yet,' Ames said. 'I've something else to say. Might as well have it flat. I'm not selling you any more whisky, Captain'

'That's O.K.,' Fletton said.

'It'll have to be,' Ames said. 'That's how it is. Mind if I tell you why?'

'Yes,' Fletton said. 'Clear out.'

'I'll tell you,' Ames said. 'It's because I like you, son.'

'Thanks,' Fletton said.

'You're not a drunk,' Ames said. 'Not yet. You can pack it up. You haven't been on it long enough. But you're going the right way.'

'You turned salvationist?' Fletton said. 'Shall we sing a hymn?'

'Look at you now,' Ames said, unmoved. 'You'll have the horrors, next. Then you're for it. But you won't get 'em through me.'

Fletton stood up. 'Damn you,' he began uncertainly.

Ames rose too. 'It's all right,' he said. 'I'm going. I only came because I didn't fancy telling you in the bar, with other folk there, like as not. So long, then.' He turned and paused. 'No hard feelings,' he said. 'Sure you won't come along now - ?'

'No,' Fletton shouted.

'Some other time, then,' Ames said. 'Any time you like. Look out for yourself, son.' He limped off, and at the corner met the rector and Kenneth Barnes. He raised his hat. 'Why, Ames,' Fletton heard the rector say; and Ames': 'Afternoon, rector. Mr Ken.' His feeling was one of blank incredulity: the whole thing was impossible - he sat down again, feeling a weak sweat break out all over his body.

The rector came forward smiling, holding his son by the arm. 'Godfrey,' he said. He looked about him with interest. 'Charming,' he said. 'Quite delightful. An old stable-yard has such an atmosphere of peace -'

'Look,' Fletton said in a low voice. 'There isn't some mistake, is there ?'

'No, I don't think so,' the rector said.

'I mean,' Fletton said. 'You don't think there's a garden-party or something - ?'

'No, no,' Mr Barnes said cheerfully. 'Nothing so formal. Just a social call -'

'I'm not feeling very sociable,' Fletton said.

'Why should you?' the rector said. 'We're the sociable ones. Ken felt like a stroll, and so -'

'How do you do, Fletton?' the blind man said in his deep voice. He held out his hand in Fletton's general direction. Fletton hesitated, then got up and took it. There seemed nothing else he could do.

'Well, you're here,' he said. 'You'd better sit down, I suppose.' He pushed forward Ames' box. 'Here,' he said.

The blind man sat down, feeling for the box with both hands. He raised his face to the sun, turning it from side to side.

'Thanks,' he said. 'It's nice in the sun.'

'What about you, rector?' Fletton said. 'Can you -?'

'I won't sit, if you don't mind,' the rector said. 'May I explore a little? I haven't been up here for years, and then it was all front door calling. You know?' He wandered off.

'Please yourself,' Fletton said. He leaned back against the pump, looking at the blind man's face in silence. 'This isn't fair,' he said at last, as if the words were forced out of him.

'No,' Ken said. 'It isn't, is it?' He smiled suddenly. 'You'd be surprised what a cure for self-consciousness it is, not having eyes. Not for consciousness, just self-consciousness.'

'Is it?' Fletton said.

'You mustn't blame dad for this,' Ken said. 'He carried it off very well, but he was writhing, inwardly. And you didn't make it any easier.'

'Should I have done?' Fletton said.

'I don't see why,' Ken said. 'If we're just a pain in the neck - as we are, of course - you've every right to say so. I'm just saying that it's my idea: I made him come. He's a great man, my father - but far too much of a gentleman to make a good missionary.'

'And you're not?' Fletton said.

The blind man shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm not much of anything,' he said. 'Being blind - it's almost like belonging to a third sex - neither fish, flesh nor fowl, if you get what I mean. I certainly didn't come to preach.'

'Why did you?' Fletton said.

'That's the key question,' he admitted. 'I suppose I had a vague idea -' He stopped, and laughed. 'It's odd, really. I was very annoyed with Harry, that day at home, for what she said to you. It was impertinence, and quite unwarranted, anyway. And ever since then, until now, I've said leave the man alone -'

'Decent of you,' Fletton said bitterly, 'to find me worth talking about.'

'My dear chap,' Ken said, 'it's natural enough surely. You can't be master of this house and not be of some interest in Fletton, you know. Anyway, I thought I had a bit of an inkling of how you looked at things –'

'Did you?' Fletton murmured.

'I'd say we're pretty much in the same boat,' he said. 'Wouldn't you?' Fletton did not reply. 'You wouldn't call yourself a whole man, for instance?' he went on with a kind of inexorable gentleness.

'Look,' Fletton said.

'You wouldn't take that from anyone else,' Ken said. 'I know. I've got you pinned down. You've got to listen because you can't stop me except by shooting me; to run away from someone who can't follow isn't just cowardly, it's absurd. The only thing that makes it worth while running away from yourself is because you know inwardly you'll find yourself waiting at the other end.'

'Rot,' Fletton said.

'Think it over,' Ken said. 'Maybe it's rot, maybe it isn't. Anyway, you can credit me with the usual good intentions as well: I thought talking to me might be an improvement, in a kind of way, on talking to yourself.'

'Don't think I don't know that you're worse off than I am,' Fletton began. 'But –'

'Oh no,' the blind man said. 'Get that out of your head. I'm not. If I were I'd be wasting my time and yours too. If I were I'd be more interested in me than I am in you. That's the whole point. I'm not a bit interested in me. I've had a good look at myself; I've said well, there you are, that's you, old son, nothing much to write home about, certainly not worth running away from. Take yourself for what you are – and *stop running*, because no one's going to follow you. Not even me.' He laughed. 'Sounds pretty high-flown – not to say toshy – put into words. But I found it worked. I thought you might too – if I could make you

listen. And I thought suddenly that I'd better try. That's why I made Dad bring me up here.'

'Well, I've listened,' Fletton said. 'You've been frank with me, so you won't mind if I'm frank with you.'

'Not a bit,' Ken said.

'All right,' Fletton said. 'I've done a bit of running away from myself, it's true, and so far I've won. I can handle myself, thanks. What I can't handle is other people queueing up to watch the circus. Your sister seems to have spent most of her time chasing me about ever since I came here -'

'Harry doesn't chase people, Fletton,' Ken said. 'You least of all. When you came she thought you might be what the doctor ordered. She doesn't any more, believe me.'

'Good enough,' Fletton said. 'I came here to be left alone. That's all I want. Thank you for coming. It was a kind thought. I appreciate it, although I didn't ask for it. I don't ask anyone to come: you, or your family, or Mrs Winnington ruddy Jones. I don't want that pub-keeper, and he doesn't want me any more. That's good, too. The fewer people want me the better I like it. I don't want favours: I don't want anything except to be left alone. I had a thick night last night -'

'So I heard,' Ken said.

'Dear Mrs Winnington-Jones,' Fletton said. 'Well, I was drunk, if it's any interest to you or anyone else. I spent the night in a Mrs Walsh's cottage. She said the only man who ever treated her decently was a nigger. She's the only person in this place who's treated me as I want to be treated: she took me outside to be sick, and apart from that she left me alone. So you can tell that to Mrs Winnington-Jones.'

'I won't bother,' Ken said. 'I'm sorry I haven't been able to be of more use, Fletton. If I could have - but it just didn't come out right. We'll leave you alone, but you'll never leave yourself alone until you have a good look at yourself and find you're not worth the centre of the picture. You're not worth it, old boy; none of us are. Do you think you could find my father for me?'

Chapter Eight

*

IT was Ted Sloan's habit to meet Sue out beyond Dimfold, in a hanging coppice above the Stewbury road. She was not afraid of her father; fear means rejection, and she accepted him, wholly. She gave him her service as his right; it was never a subject of argument between them, she literally thought nothing of it. Consequently, when for the first time in her life she herself wanted to do something, she did it, and thought nothing of that either.

It was Ted who was afraid, not of Gribble but of his mother and her reaction to a possible pronunciamento from Gribble on the subject of his daughter. He was afraid, too, of his mates' jeers. He was too young to have outgrown fully the idea that a liking for female society implied effeminacy; he had been brutally outspoken on the subject when one by one the elders of his generation had fallen by the way and taken to Sunday night strollings up Dimfold Lane. Now he had himself reached that brief period when a boy is master among his equals; he was just not ready to face the contempt of the old society for the pleasures of the new, the giggling darkness of the lane. And even if he had been, he would never have chosen Sue as his companion. If he *had* wanted a girl, she would have been like Hilda Taylor: someone with a bit of go in her, someone the Yanks would have whistled after. But he did not want a girl: he had hung round Miss Taylor because it was interesting in Stewbury, where he had a chance of getting away with it, to pretend to be older than he was – hence Police-constable Helliwell's biased and totally incorrect deduction. He most certainly did not want Sue Gribble; he could not understand at all what he saw in her; it had never occurred to him that the explanation lay rather in what she saw in him.

Nevertheless, every Thursday afternoon, when Gribble had gone off to the Stadium at Corby, he met her in the coppice above the Stewbury road. For all these reasons, and because she would have marched barefoot to London if that had been his command, she would set off about half-past two, carrying a basket, or a parcel, hurrying in a business-like way, and proceed by one of a number of routes laid down by her unwilling lover, to the coppice. Some time during the afternoon he would appear, having crawled under hedges and through ditches and run bent double across open fields; he would part the leaves and stick his grinning face through, or say behind her, boo; and always she would put her hand to her heart and cry out, genuinely scared. There was no variety about Sue; you could bet on her.

Everyone in Fletton knew of these secret assignations except his mother and her father; no one told Mrs Sloan because that would have been against the rules, and no one told Gribble because what he didn't know wasn't worth knowing – or telling.

Their children did not spend their time in dalliance; Ted talked and she listened, mostly. He talked of what he had done and what he was going to do, and she drank it in. He would be manly, cruel, and she would shrink. He would be daredevil, bold, and she would admire. They enjoyed it very much; it had a tonic effect on both.

Their sexual adventure had been exploratory, experimental, more or less cold-blooded on his side, submissive on hers. He had not thought much of it, so it had not been repeated. When she told him about the baby, he laughed uproariously. Persevering, she went into physiological detail. 'So what?' he said. 'Be your age, kid. Wait till you grow up.' She waited.

Towards the end of October she was certain; she felt the child move.

'But it did, I tell you,' she said.

'It never,' he said. He was still laughing at her.

'It did,' she said strenuously, almost in tears. She hated this attitude of his; it made her feel silly, when she ought to have been feeling important. 'There!'

'Where?' he said, looking up at the tree-tops.

'It did it again,' she said. 'It did, honest. Here, give me your hand. Go on, give it to me.'

'Can't feel a damn thing,' he said after a minute.

'Wait,' she said. They sat silent. Then: 'There!' she said again. She was triumphant.

'You did that,' he said.

'I never,' she said. 'It wasn't me at all.'

'You jerked,' he said.

'I did not,' she said. 'Ted Sloan, you're - *There!* Now d'you believe me?'

'Here,' he said. 'D'you mean -?' He stared at her.

'I've been trying to tell you,' she said. 'You wouldn't listen.' A tear of pure relief ran down her face.

'Crumbs,' he said in a whisper. 'What we going to do?' He got up, walked two paces, turned, and looked down at her. 'What's your old man going to say?' He felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

She answered his questions in order, quite composed. 'Get wed,' she said. 'He can't do owt when we're wed.'

He stared. 'Are you balmy?' he said slowly.

It took time for this to sink in. When it did: 'Don't you want me?' she said, in a lost tone.

'No,' he said roughly. She looked up at him without a word; he turned impatiently and walked away. When he came back, she had put one hand to her mouth. 'Least, not yet,' he said. 'Where we going to live? What we going to live on?'

She breathed again.

'Sides,' he burst out. 'We can't, anyway. You haven't reached the age of consent.'

'What's that?' she said.

'You're not old enough,' he said. 'You wouldn't be let

marry. I'm not old enough. The whole thing's bloody silly -' He stopped.

'What's up?' she said.

'My ma,' he said. He flopped down beside her. 'She'll kill me. Oh, crumbs.'

She put her hand on his. 'She can't do much,' she said.

'Can't she?' he said contemptuously. 'You don't know my ma. Anyone else, she'd kill me: your old man -' It was too much for him.

She pressed his hand. 'I'll tell her, if you like,' she offered. 'I'll tell both of 'em -'

'You'll keep your mouth shut,' he said 'D'you hear?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But -'

'But what?' he said.

'We can't keep it dark for long,' she said. 'I'm - I'm getting big.'

He looked her up and down. 'Oh, crumbs,' he said again. 'What we going to do?'

'I thought -' she began, and stopped. So far her suggestions had not gone very well.

'Go on then,' he said. 'Let's have it.'

'I just thought,' she said. 'Bout what you said. Living, and all. You got to go into t'army next year -'

'Oh, my God,' he said.

'But it's all right,' she said. 'There'll be your 'lowance -'

'What about it?' he said.

'I could live on that,' she said.

'But my ma's waiting for it,' he said on a rising note. 'She's been waiting for it now for nigh on a year.'

'Oh,' she said. In her own mind she could not see much force in his objections, but she was not yet used to using her mind; he knew. He sat bowed down with care, his chin on his knees, while the light in the coppice grew dim, and a chilly mist began to rise off the grass. She watched him calmly. He moved at last.

'O.K.,' he said. 'Go on home.'

She got up stiffly and smoothed down her skirt. 'You've thought of summat,' she said.

'Maybe I have, maybe I haven't,' he said. 'Go on. Scram.' She picked up her basket. 'And look here,' he said. 'Wear loose things, see? And don't let on – not to a soul.'

'O.K.,' she said. She had picked that up from him. She started off down the hill, then turned. 'Don't worry,' she said.

He looked after her shaking his head. 'Don't worry,' he said under his breath.

When she reached home, her father was already in. 'Where's ta been?' he said ill-temperedly. He had lost sixteen shillings during the afternoon – and every dog a dead cert

'Out for a walk,' she said.

'And what about my tea?' he said.

'I'm getting it,' she said with unruffled calm.

He rubbed his chin, and he too shook his head.

Ted began by prospecting. Fletton became increasingly morose each day; he had stopped drinking, not so much from necessity as from pride: he would not go into The Harvesters in case it was known there why he had broken with George Ames; and to get the stuff from Stewbury or Corby was too much trouble. He did not want it sufficiently; it had been a new, stupid, easily-formed and easily-broken habit. He got considerable grim comfort from his self-denial, on I'll-show-'em lines, without reflecting that nothing he could have done could have pleased 'them' more. He was better in health, physically, but varied between listlessness and a furious and febrile energy.

As he grew more silent, Ted grew more talkative. His inner feeling for Fletton, his admiration, was unchanged; but it is difficult to feel awe of a man when you have undressed him and put him to bed, drunk. So he would work by Fletton's side and chatter away, artlessly, revealing him-

self without afterthought; and though Fletton seldom answered, he liked the boy's undemanding company, and missed him when he was not there. In this curious one-sided way they had agreed to put down the chapel field in lettuces and runner beans, and to use the greenhouses for tomatoes. They had ripped out the shelving, and begun to wheel in barrow loads of sifted earth, bedding them down on the floor: this being as far as Ted had got with a book on tomato culture which he had bought at Woolworth's in Stewbury but failed to persuade Fletton to read.

So that when Ted began to talk about the house, Fletton took no more notice than usual, and gave no more thought to his brief replies.

'What you going to do with it?' the boy would say; and receiving no response would continue in his best adult style: 'Ever thought of a hotel? Bet you could make a packet out of one of them.' He would look at Fletton questioningly; the idea, which had never crossed his mind until the moment he voiced it, caught at his imagination. For a second he saw himself as a waiter, stiff-shirted and tail-coated, napkin over arm; then his thoughts leapt away. 'Place over Dakerford way,' he said. 'Bout as big as this too: hostel they call it; can't spell, I reckon; anyway, what's the odds - there's hundreds goes there, hundreds and hundreds. You know, little short britches and socks, like kids, and bloody great sacks on their backs. Balmy, like. And no beds; sleep on the floor, they do. Don't know who keeps it; must make thousands, I reckon.' And again he would look questioningly at Fletton, and finish up: 'What you going to do with this place, Captain?'

Fletton would mutter: 'Let it rot, and to hell with it.'

And the boy would say: 'What's upstairs, Captain? I never saw upstairs.'

'Nor me,' Fletton would say.

They would go on digging, or hoeing, or whatever they were at, until the boy thought of some new angle of approach. He was most scrupulous about it; he tried several

times, but there was no mistaking it: the Captain was just not interested.

Ted started gradually to fit out one of the upper rooms.

He had a look round first, tiptoeing along the corridors and through the great state bedrooms. He did not know why he tiptoed; there was no one to hear, and little fear of discovery. If Fletton had found out he would not have cared; he never asked questions, not even where have you been, or when are you coming again. But it made it easier, of course; and once or twice a day Ted would tiptoe up the wide shallow stairs, leaving behind the hall which as a thoroughfare Mrs Sloan was now including in her washable area, and entering the region of dust and cobwebs and quiet slanting shadows.

He chose, modestly, a small cornery room on the top floor, under the leads, which had two advantages. It was easily accessible by the servants' staircase, from the kitchen; and its window, set back behind the cornice, could not be seen from the ground. You could step out of the window on to a small square roof; that seemed as though it might be useful too. At one time the room had been used by the children of the house as a playroom; it had a pleasant atmosphere; Ted did not think about that, but chose it simply because, apart from other things, even if Fletton did ever decide to open the house, to find someone already occupying such an out of the way nook would hardly interfere with his plans. There was a built-in corner cupboard on the floor of which he found an ancient and rather mouldy golliwog with a burst skin; he brushed it off with his hand and put it on the window-sill where he could wink at it each time he came in, and say Hiya. It gave the room a lived-in look.

He found other things in other rooms, disregarded and unwanted oddments that no one had bothered to move; a four-poster bedstead with one post broken, the tester trailing and torn; an old card-table and a rickety chair. The bed was useless, but he stripped off the canopy, nearly choking

himself with dust, and took that to the old playroom with the chair and the table. He brought up the back-stairs, gradually, in bundles, enough dry grass to make a bed on the floor, which he covered with the material from the four-poster and a tattered horse-blanket from the stables; a piece of broken mirror, and a bottle of water.

He surveyed the result with some pleasure; it looked O.K.: he would not have minded living there himself. He saw no reason why Sue should not live there indefinitely, or at any rate until after the baby was born. He could feed her all right, and drop in and see her; and after that the baby could stay there while she went back to her father. He had a limited outlook combined with an adventurous nature and a vast ignorance of the world; living was from day to day, things worked themselves out. He was immediately concerned with forestalling discovery; later, he thought vaguely, he would probably marry the girl and settle down, after his turn in the army. That was, if he decided to allow himself to be conscripted: he had not finally made up his mind on that. He rarely made up his mind about anything more than a week ahead.

He was all set before the middle of November. He told Sue on an afternoon when the coppice was dripping with wet, when the air seemed to be semi-liquid and the ground squelched under foot at every step. They stood facing each other under the bare trees, arguing.

'I don't care,' she said. 'It's not reight.'

'Oh, heck,' he said. 'What's not reight?'

'The Captain not knowing,' she said. 'How would you like it, if someone came and lived in your house and you didn't know?'

'Have a bit of sense,' he said. 'That's different. How could they?'

'I don't care,' she said again. She was cold, and felt miserably obstinate. She was developing rapidly under the stress of circumstance, and leaving him behind. It was the first time she had ever really opposed him. He had no

resources with which to meet it; he took refuge in mere bullying.

'O.K., then,' he said. 'Go to hell for all I care. See if I worry. I'm done, see?'

He flung away through the trees. She did not move. When he looked round she was still standing in exactly the same position, with hunched shoulders, her hands in the pockets of her old raincoat. He went back, cursing.

'Go on,' he said. 'Go home. You can't stand there all night.'

Still she said nothing. He drew nearer, and saw that she was crying. 'O Christ,' he said. 'What's up now?' The tears ran down her wet face. 'What the hell's wrong?' he shouted suddenly. 'Cut it out, will you?'

Her features crumpled. 'I'm frightened,' she brought out.

He found himself with his arms about her shoulders, awkwardly, staring desperately over her head into the trees. 'There,' he said, 'it's all reight. There's nowt to be frightened on.' He himself was terrified, as much by his own emotion as by hers. Oddly enough, her weakness made her older and himself younger; he was quite at a loss. And at the same time it was absolutely incumbent on him to take charge, to master the situation.

'There,' he said feebly. 'There, there. It'll be all reight, I tell you. I'll make it all reight.' She remained motionless against his chest. He took hold of her shoulders and shook her gently. 'D'you hear?' he said. 'It'll be all reight.'

She sniffed. 'I thought,' she began in a muffled tone, he bent his head to listen. 'I thought you wanted to be rid of me.'

'Course I don't,' he said. 'What d'you tek me for? What d'you think I've been doing all this fixing up for? So we can get away from your old man, and my ma' – he swallowed – 'and be on our own. I'm going to be there every day, aren't I? Aren't I?' He was painfully aware, now, of the inadequacy of his planning. He plunged on, swerving aside

from the difficulties, stressing the advantages of his idea. 'What d'you think's going to happen if you stay?' he said. 'Soon's they find out, you'll get shoved in a home, or summat, and then where'll you be? And me in quod, like as not. How'd you like that? Eh?'

She shook her head.

'There you are, then,' he said.

She knew it was all a fairy tale, but she knew she would give in. There had never been any question but that she would give in. Also, simultaneously and so deep down in her consciousness that she had never bothered to examine it, she nursed an enormous confidence in her own ability to overcome any combination of physical circumstances whatever, if she chose. It was him she was feminely unsure of, the male she so much admired; and instinct told her that the more he could be made to argue, the stronger his asseverations, and the more complete her surrender – the more closely she would bind him to her. The whole process was as natural and thoughtless as a flower's attraction of the bee.

'But –' she said.

'But what?' he said, with almost his usual roughness.

'How'm I going to live, up there?' she said. 'What'll I eat, I mean – and if there's no water –'

'Leave me to see to that,' he said grandly. 'You'll not clem.'

'But what about a closet?' she asked.

He laughed loudly. 'A bucket'll do you, won't it?' he said. 'You'll be wanting a bath next.' And to both of them, brought up on country sanitation, that at any rate did seem eminently reasonable. 'Owt else?' he demanded.

'No,' she said doubtfully.

'O.K. then,' he said.

Both felt it to be a satisfactory conclusion, but for different reasons; they had, in fact, been arguing two separate cases.

The next move was to install her in her new apartment, a matter not only of reaching it unseen by the village and by Fletton himself; she had also a minimum number of possessions from which she refused to be parted and without which she would not stir. She packed these into a very old, two-piece bass-basket, consisting of two boxes of plaited straw without lids, one of which fitted over the other, the whole being bound together by two straps surmounted by a leather handle. Gribble as a young man had been used to take this to Blackpool with him for his annual holiday; the year he met the late Mrs Gribble it had held his straw boater, his blazer, his tight white flannel trousers and his white canvas shoes. An aroma of holidays still hung about it, even for Sue, who had never had a holiday, so that lugging its faded splendour along the Stewbury road the following Thursday she felt quite festive.

She said as much to Ted, in the coppice; but he was nervy and on edge, and merely grunted ill-temperedly about its size. He went on with it while she waited for him to get clear; the beginning of another week of waiting which she bore much more placidly than he did. She heard nothing of him, and so assumed that he had passed safely through Dimfold, up the lane, and over the wall into the park, as indeed he had. She went about her usual business for two days, while the basket lay under a bush by the lake until Ted's opportunity came to smuggle it into the house; and then for four more days after that. Each day, making her morning delivery to the Hall, she looked at its empty façade and thought, with a kind of faint astonishment: I'll be living there next week; but it did not really seem to apply to her, it was someone else who would actually be inside.

She had no reason to feel sentimental about her father, but she kept wondering what he would do when she had gone: not about her going, but about the house and the shop. She felt guilty; she chopped a good pile of wood, scrubbed the floors with additional energy, and cooked him

a succession of favourite meals. Several times he caught her staring at him with a kind of compassion in her look; 'all right,' he said once – 'it's me. Staring. Mind your manners, girl.' Bad manners were anything that disturbed or upset him.

Six quiet days, during which Ted's comings and goings were still more erratic than usual. He put in few appearances at the Hall, and stayed only for short times; he had so little to say that even Fletton noticed it. He was on tenterhooks for fear he should be asked questions; not necessarily about Sue, but about anything. He could not trust himself to open his mouth without blurting out something that would give him away. He developed a hunted air; when Fletton said casually: 'Anything wrong?' – he pretended not to hear and walked away, whistling. Fletton, who regretted the question almost before it was out of his mouth, shrugged his shoulders and forgot about it.

Thursday came again. November the twenty-first. Sue noted the date specially. She had had an imaginative idea, an event so rare for her that it gave her a solemn feeling. She had decided that really, all things considered, this could be looked on as her wedding day. It was a parting and a beginning; the setting up, in a sort of way, of her first home; even if in the future she had a real wedding, it would not be the same but only a seal on something already done. She worked soberly and conscientiously, all the time thinking over each successive job: I shan't be doing this to-morrow. Peeping through the window she watched her father cross the Square to the bus-stop; she was not exactly sad, but she had a sensation of emptiness, as though he were walking away from her out of her life, never to be seen again. She watched the bus draw up and then, gathering speed, vanish beyond the rectory. She sighed, and went back into the kitchen, where she laid Gribble's tea on a clean cloth; the bread and butter covered with a plate, a pan with water on the stove, two eggs beside it. Then there was nothing else to do. She gave her shoes a rub with a duster, and put on her

coat, brushed her hands together with a little gesture of finality, and left the house.

It was a calm still day, more like the last of August than November. Somehow it had not seemed worth while to carry on the usual pretence of going busily on a definite errand. She had no parcel, no basket; she sauntered, hands in pockets. The children were playing in the school yard on the far side of the rectory; Miss Barnes was standing in the doorway, bell in hand, watching them. Seeing Sue, she waved; Sue waved back; it was like having someone to see you off on a journey; she almost called 'good-bye,' but shyness stopped her. She left the Square behind, and walked on slowly towards Stewbury, humming a tune under her breath. Her feet felt dancy; she pulled a stick from the hedge and cut at the dead grass tops with it.

Where the sign-post, the letters almost indistinguishable, pointed to DIMFOLD, she turned left, unlatching the gate and closing it again, carefully, behind her. The lane led under leafless trees, its surface wet, rutted, and cut up by cattle, which had deposited other odorous traces. It opened into the farmyard round a half-used rick; a dog set up a hellish clatter, five hens ran aimlessly scawking. Jack Lane, in the loft above the stable, came to the upper door to see who it was. He too, waved, and whistled on a double falling note; in spite of herself she looked up and saw his teeth gleaming in the shadow; she dropped her eyes and hurried on. She did not like Jack; he was cheeky.

Half-way up the slope past the hen-houses she had to slacken her pace, breathless; and at the top she stopped a moment to rest, leaning on the gate under old Lane's threatening notice. Then she set off again, impatient to have this done with, to be there, but adopting an exaggeratedly casual air. Ted had been most emphatic in his directions; not to hurry, not to seem to be going anywhere special; to pause at the stream as though she was just looking round, and whistle softly. She was afraid that when the time came she would not be able to encompass a whistle. On the way

down the hill she practised, tentatively and not very satisfactorily. She came to the stream and crossed the stones; and pursed her lips. Sure enough no whistle came, only a kind of wet and distant hiss.

Nevertheless Ted's head appeared at once, first through the bars of the grid, then over the wall. He cut short her 'hallo'. 'Come on,' he said in a hoarse urgent whisper. 'Get a move on.' His gesture almost lifted her up the wall. She looked at it doubtfully.

'I don't know if I -' she began.

'Give's your hands,' he said. 'Come on. Look sharp.' He took her two hands and by main force hauled her up.

She cried out as she reached the top: 'My knee -'

'Forget it,' he said tersely. 'Now. Jump'

She jumped, and fell. He pulled her to her feet and they ran, hand in hand. He flung himself down behind a bush, her with him.

'My knee,' she began again, rubbing it.

'Sh,' he said. 'Hark.' They lay still; there was no sound. He relaxed, blowing out a great breath, and grinned at her.

'Now you just look here, Ted Sloan,' she said angrily.

'Where?' he said.

'You've no right pulling me about,' she said. 'Me like this, and all.'

'Like what?' he said.

'Like I am,' she said.

It sank in. 'Oh, that,' he said, momentarily abashed. 'You're O.K., aren't you?'

'No thanks to you,' she said. 'And just look at my knee.' She exhibited a triangular tear in her stocking.

'What's up with it?' he said, peering.

'It's all scratched,' she said.

'It's not bleeding,' he said.

'Well, it hurts, anyhow,' she said.

But he was on his feet. 'Come on,' he said, dismissing the subject. 'We've got to get a move on.'

She followed him resentfully along the stream. Below the bridge, he began to scale the embankment. She stood at the bottom, watching him. From twelve or thirteen feet up he looked back; she had not moved. 'Come on,' he said urgently.

'I'm not climbing that,' she said.

'Oh, yes you are,' he said. He slid downwards, landing in a heap, and picked himself up. 'Go on,' he said. 'You go first. I'll give you a shove. Go *on*.'

He was inexorable. She began to climb, without a word. He followed, butting her periodically from below. At the top she was snivelling.

'I wish I hadn't come,' she brought out. 'I wouldn't have, if I'd have known -'

'Oh, shut up,' he said. 'We're up, aren't we?'

She turned her head away. 'You don't care,' she said. 'You don't care if I die -'

'Don't be daft,' he said. 'Course I do.'

'No you don't,' she said.

'Look,' he said. He had tried to keep the job on a business-like basis, but it was defeating him. 'D'you think I'd be doing all this -'

'I'm going home,' she said flatly.

'You can't go home,' he said. He gave himself up to it. 'Look.' He put an arm clumsily about her shoulders. 'We're over t'worst now. But we've got to get into t'house before Captain gets back. He's down by t'chapel, but he'll be back about four. That's why we're hurrying, see?'

The touch of his arm, which was what she wanted, pacified her. 'I'm not doing any more climbing,' she said in a muffled tone.

'There's no more to do,' he said. 'But we got to hurry.'

'All right,' she said.

'That's it,' he said. 'That's better.' He patted her. 'Ready, then?'

She nodded, with a little smile. He winked at her, and took her hand again. 'Come on, then,' he said.

They crept up the last of the drive. 'Now,' he whispered. 'Run. Just to t'door. Ready?'

She nodded again, and they ran, across the terrace, up the steps, under the portico. The silence of the house closed round them. He pushed the door too, and they leaned back against it, panting. 'We made it,' he said.

She squeezed his hand, but he released it. 'Well,' he said. 'Let's get upstairs.'

'What's in there?' she said, prepared to be interested.

'Nowt,' he said. 'It's all empty. That's t'drawing-room, and that's t'library.'

'Why doesn't the Captain live in it?' she asked

He shrugged. 'Pleases himself, I reckon,' he said. 'He's no call to if he doesn't want to. Come on.' He gripped her arm just above the elbow and propelled her up the stairs. Beyond the gallery, to either hand, passages ran away in a kind of desolate half-light; closed doors echoed each other like notes of music repeated and sustained. He turned to the left and she followed, tiptoeing without knowing it. 'It's quiet,' she said in a whisper. He marched on assuredly; turning right at right-angles and then left once more, joining a narrow stair that wound back on itself. At the top another short passage gave issue to three doors. He opened the middle one and stood aside.

'There,' he said

She went in past him, timidly.

'Well?' he said, behind her, with a hint of pride. She looked round at him over her shoulder, then forward again. She took in the heap of grass with its ragged coverings, the forlorn chair, the broken table, without speaking. She had known what was there, but had expected something that would transcend knowledge. She was disappointed, but did not like to show it because she did not want to disappoint him. 'O.K.?' he said.

'It's - lovely,' she said.

'Not so bad, is it?' he said. He came and stood beside her. 'That's t'bed,' he said, pointing. 'It's soft. Look.' He knelt

down and pounded it with his hands. Dust rose from it; he sneezed. 'And t'chair's all reight, if you tek it easy,' he said, still kneeling. 'And there's your basket.'

Looking down at his back, she said with resolution: 'It's grand.' To make up for her disloyalty, she decided on the spur of the moment to make him a partner in her dream. She put her hand on his shoulder. 'It's – it's like – ours,' she said. 'Our place – where we can be together, like.'

He scrambled to his feet. 'Here,' he said. 'It's you that's living here, not me. I've got to go home.'

She gave him a blank look.

'Course,' he said hastily. 'I'll be up now and again, like I said, with grub and that – when I get t'chance.' He gestured towards the window. 'Look,' he said. 'You can get out through t'window – sit out there when you want. Nobody can see.' He struggled with the catch. 'There.' He climbed out and turned. 'Come on: I'll show you.'

She was crying again. 'I don't want to,' she said. She threw herself down on the bed. 'I don't know as I can stand it,' he heard her say. 'All on my own, months and months.' He felt the months weigh on him like great stones, and looked round desperately for help of some kind, but found none. His eye fell on the golliwog on the window-sill; he came back through the window and sat beside her. 'Look,' he said. 'See this? I thought it'd do for t' – for t'babby,' he brought out.

That roused her. She looked up, interested in spite of herself. 'It might,' she said, sniffing. She examined it. 'I could sew it up,' she said. 'It'd be all right then. Where'd it come from?'

'In t'cupboard,' he said, pointing.

She got up and went over to the cupboard, wiping her nose and eyes with both hands. 'I could put my things in there,' she said. 'If there was any hooks.'

'I'll bring some nails, and a hammer,' he said.

'And I've got summat else,' she said. 'I'll show you.' She began to unstrap her basket. He helped her; they raised the

lid. On the top of her scanty wardrobe lay a fragment of dirty white material, transfixed by two⁸ knitting needles. She held it up by the needles; a strand of wool ran from it to a ball in the corner of the basket.

‘What is it?’ he said, at a loss.

‘A little jacket, silly,’ she said. ‘I just started it the other day.’

‘Oh,’ he said. For some reason it embarrassed him. He averted his eyes, but she went on looking at it thoughtfully. ‘Course it’s not very good,’ she said. ‘I only learnt at school. But I expect I’ll get better at it as I go on.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Well, I got to go, case the Captain’s back. I’ll be up soon – with some grub and stuff.’ He turned at the door. ‘There’s a coupla apples in t’cupboard. So long.’

She ran to the door after him. ‘Ted,’ she called urgently. He looked back. ‘What’s up?’ he said.

‘Don’t you come in without knocking,’ she said.

‘Why not?’ he said.

‘Don’t you dare,’ she said. ‘I don’t want you seeing me in my slip, or anything.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘O.K.’

He went off down the stairs, grinning. She closed the door very quietly.

Chapter Nine

*

THE next morning, soon after eight o'clock, a police car drew up outside the grocer's shop. The two men in it, a sergeant and a constable driver, got out. The driver came round to the kerb and the sergeant said: 'Where's Helliwell?'

The constable looked about and replied: 'Dunno, sergeant. He's not here.'

'I've got eyes,' the sergeant said. 'Go and get him.'

'Yes, sergeant,' the constable said. He went off round the corner of the Square. Sergeant Thomas assumed a grim look; pouting, he thrust his chin into the air, left and right, with the object of freeing a little more of the skin of his throat from the stranglehold of his collar. He put his hands behind his back and began to pace up and down, three steps each way.

The shop door opened and Gribble came out, wiping his mouth. He swallowed the remains of the bacon in it and said: 'Where is she?' He peered round with darting glances, then back at the sergeant. The sergeant, seeing no resemblance between Gribble's question and his own to the constable, said irritably: 'Where's who?'

'My girl,' Gribble said loudly. 'Who d'you -?'

The sergeant cut him short as Helliwell, wheeling his bicycle and escorted by the other constable, emerged from the Spurling road. 'Better get inside,' he said. 'We don't want a parish meeting about it.' He advanced on the grocer, using his bulk to push him towards the door. Helliwell leaned his bicycle against the shop window, and said brightly: 'Morning, sergeant.' The sergeant, who never aired official differences before the non-official public, replied over his shoulder: 'Oh, you're there, are you?' His tone said much more. Helliwell, looking at the other con-

stable for sympathy, got none, and followed the sergeant into the shop. The driver walked majestically round the radiator of his car to the driving seat as Sam Jukes from the Spurling road and Abel Durdon from the post office converged upon him. At the same moment the little three-wheeler van with the papers from Corby sputtered into the Square and drew up violently alongside the police car. Four children materialized. Mrs Durdon in the post office, Mrs Winnington-Jones in her pretty Georgian house, Mrs Ames in the Fletton Arms, and Harriet Barnes in the rectory, prospected the scene from convenient windows, hidden behind the curtains.

The man with the papers, a cheerful soul with one arm, alighted from the van. 'Morning, all,' he said. There was no reply. He went round to the open back of the van, gathered up the papers against his chest, and made for the shop door. 'What's up?' he said as he passed. 'Where's t'corpse?' The driver preserved his constabular reticence; the other two, as good Flettonites, had no intention of discussing Fletton affairs with a metropolitan outsider. The paper man shouldered open the door and vanished.

Jukes said to the policeman, confidentially: 'Where is she?'

'Where's who?' Durdon said. He hopped up and down in his hunger for information. The policeman said nothing; he stared impassively before him.

'Gribble's girl,' Jukes said to Durdon. 'She's gone – missing – skipped. What's t'latest?' he asked the policeman. 'Come on,' he said wheedlingly.

'Gone where?' Durdon said. His adam's apple ricocheted from collar to chin.

'Ah,' the butcher said. 'That's t'point, that it. That's what we want to know: Eh?' he said to the policeman.

The policeman was silent.

Mrs Sloan, on her way to the rectory, saw the car outside the grocer's, and changed her direction. The conjunction of Gribble and the law appealed to her.

'But what's your opinion, Mr Jukes?' Durdon said. 'What do you think?'

'I'll tell you,' Jukes said. 'Same as I was telling Mr Helliwell. If anyone was to ask me, I'd say: Ted Sloan.' He had no idea of Mrs Sloan's presence, nor had Durdon.

Durdon said: 'I'm afraid I don't follow you —'

'You've no call to,' the butcher said. His little eyes bulged with the humour of it. 'Don't follow *me* — follow Ted Sloan: you'll find her all right.' He burst into wheezy laughter and slapped his knee.

'What's that about our Ted?' Mrs Sloan said, behind him. 'I'll trouble you, Mr Jukes, to leave my lad's name out of it, whatever it is.'

Inside the grocer's, Gribble had led the way through the shop to the kitchen. The two policemen filled the place not exactly with the smell but with an atmosphere of shaving soap and tobacco and heavy masculinity. The little grocer looked smaller and more weazened beside them. He faced them and said belligerently: 'Well?'

'Well?' the sergeant said. He looked round for a chair and sat down deliberately; he took off his peaked cap, revealing hair meticulously cut and brilliantined, and parted in the middle. It gave him an oddly dandified unpolice-manlike appearance, as though his uniform were a fancy costume donned for the occasion.

'Well, what about it?' Gribble said.

Helliwell took out his notebook and a pencil and sat down at the table. He was ill at ease, and foresaw trouble. He tapped the tea-cosy with his pencil.

'That's what we're here to find out,' the sergeant said. 'So let's have it. Begin at the beginning.'

'Now look 'ere,' Gribble said. 'All I want to know is where's my girl. It was eight o'clock last night when I saw Helliwell 'ere and told him she'd gone. That's twelve hours since. Where is she?'

'She hasn't come back?' the sergeant said.

'Course she 'asn't come back,' Gribble said. 'D'you think I'd be sitting 'ere yattering wi' you if she 'ad? What are you doing about it, that's what I want to know?'

'Can you give us any information as to where she's likely to have gone, or why?' the sergeant said impassively

'Information,' Gribble said. 'It's *me* that wants information -'

The sergeant coughed. He examined the nails of his left hand. 'That's no way to talk to Sergeant Thomas, Jim,' Helliwell said. His pencil beat a tattoo against the tea-cosy.

'I can deal with Mr Gribble, Helliwell,' the sergeant said. He eyed the pencil coldly. Helliwell put it in his pocket. The grocer looked from one to the other, and collected himself

'I'm all upset,' he said. 'She's my girl. You'd be worried yourself.' He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Let's 'ave a cup o' tea, shall we?' he suggested belatedly.

'Not for me,' the sergeant said.

The bell rang in the shop as the paper-man entered. 'Just a minute,' Gribble said. He went out. The sergeant narrowed his eyes at Helliwell; Helliwell looked self-consciously at the floor. Before the sergeant could speak:

'Morning, Jim,' they heard the paper-man say. 'Anything up?'

'It's my girl,' Gribble said. 'She's gone. Run off, or summat.'

'Eh, I'm sorry to hear that,' the man said. 'Where's she gone, then?'

'Who's that?' the sergeant said to Helliwell.

'The papers - from Corby,' Helliwell said.

The sergeant went into the shop. 'Here,' he said to the paper-man. 'You get about. Have you seen anything of this girl?'

'No,' the man said. 'Can't say as I have.'

'Well, keep your eyes open,' the sergeant said. 'You might.'

He turned to come back into the kitchen as the man opened the front door. A babble of voices flooded in. 'What

the devil –?’ the sergeant said. He made for the door, pushing the paper-man aside. ‘What’s all this?’ he shouted.

For the fraction of a second the group of people round the car froze, became static: Mrs Sloan with her arm raised, Jukes stepping back, Durdon ineffectually between them; the police driver half-way out of the car. Then all four faces turned towards the shop and away, and interrupted movement resumed its flow. Jukes fell, and Mrs Sloan grappled blindly with Durdon. The driver jumped towards them. A child began to cry; next door, in the post office, a window was pushed up and Mrs Durdon’s plangent voice cut across the noise: ‘Abel. Come in here – at once. D’you hear?’

He heard, and tried vainly to disengage himself. Mrs Sloan, transported with fury, clung to him with one hand and beat him about the face with the other. ‘Our Ted’s nowt to do wi’ it,’ she kept screaming, ‘nowt to do wi’ it –’

The sergeant and the driver reached them together. The driver took Durdon, pushing him away: he vanished into the post office; the sergeant gripped the little old woman by the shoulders and shook her into her senses.

‘Stop it,’ he said, ‘stop it. What’s the matter with you?’ She stopped screaming; she was breathing in great gulps. She pushed back her hair and looked round wildly.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ the sergeant repeated, still holding her.

‘It’s – it’s – our Ted,’ she said gasping; and the sergeant’s eye fell on the driver. ‘And what the hell d’you think you’re doing?’ he said, forgetting his own rule, ‘letting all this start?’

‘I was just sitting in the car, sergeant,’ the man protested. ‘It blew up all of a sudden, like – I’d no idea –’

‘You’ve nothing to have an idea with,’ the sergeant said bitterly. ‘Clear these kids away – and don’t let anyone else hang around. And you two’ – this to Jukes and Mrs Sloan – ‘let’s see what’s going on.’ He shepherded them into the grocer’s. ‘That’s all,’ he said to the paper-man. ‘I’ve done with you for now – clear out.’

'But I haven't done anything,' the man said.

'Then clear out before you do,' the sergeant said. 'Go on – pack it up.'

The man went, muttering. The sergeant took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. 'Now,' he said, 'what have you got to say – both of you? You should be ashamed,' he added deeply. 'Eight o'clock in the morning, too.'

'I'm saying nowt,' Mrs Sloan said sullenly.

'Nor me,' the butcher said, like a hang-dog boy.

'Now look,' the sergeant said. 'You're the butcher, aren't you? And you're a respectable woman, by the looks of you. You're going to look pretty in the dock with a lot of nice little charges hung round your necks – assault and battery, for instance, and disturbing the peace, and obstructing the police – *and* there's plenty more where those came from. Speak up now – come on.'

Mrs Sloan compressed her lips. The butcher looked from one to the other.

'It won't do you any good, Sam,' Helliwell said warningly. The sergeant eyed him; he stopped. Jukes burst out: 'All I said was –'

'Watch thyself, Sam Jukes,' Mrs Sloan said.

'It can't be 'elped,' he said. 'You started this, you old cow. All I said was if you want to find Sue Gribble ask Ted Sloan where she is'

'I'll have thi eyes out for that,' she said, starting forward.

'No, you don't,' the sergeant said. 'Come back here.' He caught her by the arm so that she squealed: 'You're hurting.'

'Be still,' he said. She subsided.

Gribble stepped in front of the butcher and said slowly: 'And what the 'ell d'you mean by that?'

'What I say,' Jukes said. 'If you're asking for it you can have it: Ted Sloan's been mucking about wi' your Sue for months.'

'It's a damned lie,' the grocer said. 'It's a damned bloody lie –'

'It's a fact,' Helliwell said. Gribble stared at him open-mouthed.

The sergeant pulled at his collar. He turned to Helliwell. 'You know about it, too?' he said gently.

Helliwell nodded. 'Everyone does,' he said.

'Everyone does,' the sergeant repeated. 'Everyone except his mother and her father?'

'Looks like it,' Helliwell agreed.

'But you knew?' the sergeant said. Helliwell nodded again. 'Then why the hell didn't you say so before?'

'Well, sergeant,' Helliwell said. 'I haven't had much chance now, have I?'

The sergeant took out his handkerchief. Mrs Sloan said: 'Who ought to know better nor his ma?'

Gribble sneered.

'I'll tell thee who to ask,' she said. 'Ask him.' She indicated Gribble. 'He knows it weren't our Ted. He knows why she's gone. Ask him how he treats her – like dirt – like a slave, slaving away morn till night. Ask him.'

'You rotten old bitch,' Gribble said. 'I'll talk to you after –'

'None of that,' the sergeant said. 'We'll have to see this Ted. Where is he?' he said to Mrs Sloan.

'I don't know,' she said, relapsing into sullenness.

'He'll be either in Stewbury or up at the Hall,' Helliwell said.

'Up at the Hall?' the sergeant repeated.

'He does odd jobs for Sir Godfrey,' Helliwell said. 'Sir Godfrey Fletton.'

'Oh, does he?' the sergeant said. The door opened and Harriet Barnes came in. She looked at them; they looked at her. She crossed to Mrs. Sloan.

'Are you all right, Mrs Sloan?' she said. 'I came as soon as I could.'

'May I ask –?' the sergeant began.

'I'm Harriet Barnes,' she said.

'The Reverend Mr Barnes's daughter,' Helliwell said to

the sergeant, *sotto voce*. 'I know,' the sergeant said. He shook his head as if to rid himself of a fly. 'Good morning, Miss Barnes,' he said civilly.

'Mrs Sloan works for me,' she said. She put her arm round the little woman's shoulders. 'I saw you shaking her – from the window.' She gestured in the direction of the rectory. 'I thought I'd better come over.'

'Oh, you did,' the sergeant said. He used his handkerchief again, and put it away. 'Did you happen to see how she was engaged at the time?'

'I saw two men set on her,' she said. 'And then I saw you come out and – exercise discretion. You let the two men look after themselves and went for her. So, as I said, I came over.'

'Look, Miss Barnes,' the sergeant said. 'I've enough on my hands at the moment. You don't want to be a trouble to me, too, do you?'

'If you don't want trouble,' she said, 'you shouldn't start any. Come along, Mrs Sloan.'

'Just a minute, Miss,' the sergeant said. 'I'm questioning this woman.'

'Oh, are you?' she said. 'What about? Or is it a secret?'

The sergeant breathed deeply, but he was unsure of himself. The girl spoke with authority; and though the old woman had been hysterical, he knew he might have difficulty in proving it.

'It isn't,' he said. 'I don't know that you have any *right* to be told, but I've no objection to telling you. The girl, Sue Gribble, has disappeared. I am investigating her disappearance –'

'Disappeared,' she said scornfully. 'What nonsense.'

'No, it's not nonsense,' he said patiently. 'She's gone, all right. I want to know where, and why.'

'I should ask her father,' she said. She nodded towards Gribble. 'He could probably tell you why.'

'Now look 'ere, Miss Barnes,' Gribble began in a whining tone.

The sergeant looked at him. 'Something of the kind's already been said,' he said. 'We'll look into it. But it's only fair to say that it was Mr Gribble who reported the disappearance -'

'He would,' she said. 'He may have to do some work if she's really gone.'

'Be quiet,' he said sharply to Gribble. 'I don't think this is a particularly helpful attitude, Miss Barnes,' he said. 'Nor very creditable, come to that. The girl's a minor, as I understand it, and may have come to some harm. On the other hand, it seems that a boy, Ted Sloan, may be involved -'

'He'd nowt to do wi' it,' Mrs Sloan said wearily.

'Hush,' Harriet said. She patted her shoulder. 'I'm sorry, sergeant,' she said. 'You're quite right, and I'm wrong. I was annoyed, and when I'm annoyed I talk like a fool. I beg your pardon.'

The sergeant inclined his head with some dignity, but he was pleased. She was a pretty girl.

'All the same,' she said, 'I can still hardly believe she's run away. And as for Ted Sloan - well, it's absurd. Why, I saw her myself only yesterday afternoon -'

'You did?' the sergeant said. 'That may be important. What time would that be?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. She paused. 'Yes, I do, it was playtime - I'm the schoolmistress here, you know' - he nodded - 'and I was standing watching the children. It must have been - oh, about half-past three, or just after.'

'She must have got my tea and gone right off,' Gribble said.

'Did you notice anything special?' the sergeant said. 'Was she carrying a bag, or did she look worried - anything like that?'

'No,' she said. 'The contrary, if anything. She waved, and I waved back. She'd no bag. She was just dawdling - you know, out for a walk. It was a lovely afternoon.'

'I see,' the sergeant said. 'Well, it's something. Which way was she going?'

'Towards Stewbury,' Harriet said. 'It's – it's silly. She'll come back. She must have gone to friends.'

'She's no friends I know of,' Gribble said; and Harriet thought no, she wouldn't have.

'Well,' the sergeant said. 'Maybe, maybe not. We'll just have to go on enquiring, that's all, until she does. And first' – he turned to Mrs Sloan – 'we'll have to see your lad. Now,' he said, raising a hand, 'take it easy. Nobody's saying he's done anything: we've got to ask him, that's all. He works in Stewbury, you say?'

'He's at t'Railway Arms, some days,' Mrs Sloan said, with an effort. 'If he's not there, happen he's up at t'Hall. If he's not there, he'll be home to-night – late.'

'How d'you know he'll be late?' the sergeant asked.

'Because he told me so,' she spat at him.

He looked at her grimly, but let it pass. 'Right,' he said. 'Helliwell, ring the Railway Arms and see if he's there. If not, we'll try the Hall. And you people can go. If I want you I'll know where to find you. Good morning, Miss Barnes.'

He turned away into the kitchen to signify dismissal; Gribble followed him, and the shop emptied. He picked up his cap.

'Well,' he said to Gribble, 'that gives us a line, anyway. You didn't know of her association with this boy?'

'I did not,' Gribble said. 'If I 'ad –' He pressed his thin lips together.

'She didn't confide in you, then?' the sergeant said.

'What d'you mean?' Gribble said. 'She's my girl, isn't she?'

'You keep saying so,' the sergeant said. 'She didn't mention any worry, or anything on her mind?' She seemed happy?'

'Look 'ere,' Gribble said. 'You heard Miss Barnes –'

'All right, all right,' the sergeant said. 'She'd some reason for going, you know. Can you say what she was wearing?'

'Same as she always wore,' Gribble said. 'Raincoat, I expect. No 'at.'

'Shoes?'

'Black.'

'Stockings?'

'Black.'

'Silk?'

'Wool,' Gribble said. 'I'll 'ave no silk stockings in my house. There's too much -'

'All right,' the sergeant said. 'Wool. How tall is she?'

'About - about five foot, I sh'd think,' Gribble said.

'Big?'

'Biggish,' he said. 'Strong for her size, anyhow.'

'Yes,' the sergeant said. 'She'd need to be.'

'Now look,' Gribble began.

'We'll let you know if we find any trace,' the sergeant said. 'Good day, Mr Gribble.' He went out to the car, leaving the grocer fuming with smothered rage. The sergeant felt a little better. 'Where's Helliwell?' he said to his driver.

'Gone to phone,' the driver said. He sensed the sergeant's change of mood 'What's happened to t'little lass, sergeant?' he said

'God knows,' the sergeant said. He got into the car. 'If he was *your* father, what'd you do? How long's Helliwell going to be?'

Sam Jukes passed the car on his bicycle, making up for lost time. He dismounted in front of the post office, took a parcel from his basket, and went inside. Lane's trap, full of milk bottles, clattered across the Square, driven by Jack Lane, standing. He pulled the old pony to a halt, and replaced the whip in its socket. He selected two bottles of milk, vaulted over the back of the trap, and he too made for the post office.

At the door he met Jukes, coming out. 'Samuel,' he said in greeting.

'Jacky,' Sam Jukes said.

'How's tricks?' Jack said.

'So so,' the butcher said. 'Where's your pa?'

'On his back,' Jack Lane said cheerfully. 'Screws.'

'What, again?' the butcher said.

'Right,' Jack said. 'Ah well, *I* mustn't grumble. Gives his little Jack a chance for a breather. Eh?'

Durdon appeared in the door. A scratch ran from his right eye to his chin; he fingered it delicately with his left hand.

'Hallo,' Jack said. 'What's up with you? Missus going for you again?'

Durdon grimaced and twitched his head; a shudder ran down the length of his body. He closed the door hastily behind him.

'Really, Mr Lane,' he began. 'You know very well —' The rest of the sentence was lost in dental clicking.

'It was Mrs Sloan,' Jukes said. 'Savaged him, she did. Owd bitch.'

'And what did Abel do?' Jack Lane said. 'Raise Cain?' He smacked Jukes on the back, and laughed heartily.

Jukes looked at him uncomprehending, 'Went for me too,' he said solemnly. 'Just cos I said to ask young Ted. Took two slops to pull her off.' He nodded in the direction of the police car. Jack turned and surveyed them.

'What's their little game?' he said. 'Pinching the old woman, were they?'

Jukes shook his head. 'It's Jim Gribble's lass,' he said.

'Not young Sue?' Jack said. 'What's she done?'

'She's run off,' Jukes said.

'With Ted Sloan?' Jack said. 'Well, would you credit it? Young Sue.' He was lost in wonder, with a faint admixture of regret for missed opportunities. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. 'And I saw her yesterday afternoon, too.'

He looked at the other two, and they looked back at him.

Then: 'Going to tell 'em?' Jukes said. The police, he meant.

'Me?' Jack said. 'Not likely. Let 'em find out.'

'It's none of my business,' Abel Durdon said. 'And I

wouldn't like anyone to think I was interfering, if you follow me -'

'Then shut up,' Jack Lane said. 'Or I'll do more than follow you.'

'It's the principle,' Durdon said, quivering with dignity. 'And of course I might shut up and nobody the wiser. But it's that young girl -'

'Oh, can it,' Jack said. He turned on his heel.

'It's only fair to say,' Durdon said, trembling, 'that if you don't tell them, I shall.'

Young Lane swung round again. 'Oh, you will, will you?' he said. His back to the police car, he took Durdon by the front of his jacket and pulled him forward, almost lifting him off his feet. 'And what do you think I'll be doing?' he asked.

Durdon gasped; his mouth opened and shut convulsively. 'I - don't know,' he brought out. 'But I'll - I'll tell them, whatever you do. It's that young girl -'

Lane laughed, suddenly. 'O.K.,' he said. 'I'll tell 'em. Why shouldn't I?' He released the old man, who fell back against the door. 'Come to think of it, it'd be a lark, having them on. You watch.'

He swaggered over to the car Helliwell had just returned; Ted was not at Stewbury, he reported.

'We'll try the Hall, then,' the sergeant said. He saw Jack Lane over Helliwell's shoulder. 'Well?' he said, looking upward through the window.

'Morning,' Jack said. He leaned against the car.

'Morning,' the sergeant said, shortly. 'You want me?'

'Not particularly,' Jack said. 'You want me.'

'First I heard of it,' the sergeant said. 'Sorry. Carry on,' he said to the driver.

'In a hurry, aren't you?' Jack said.

The sergeant nodded. 'Right,' he said. 'Stand away, will you?'

'You don't want to know, then?' Jack said. 'O.K. Good enough.'

'Know what?' the sergeant said.

'Oh, never mind,' Jack said. 'It's no matter.'

'Look,' the sergeant said. 'I'm ready to listen to anything you have to say – if you *have* anything to say. If you haven't, don't waste my time.'

'It was only about Sue Gribble,' Jack said, with elaborate unconcern. 'Wouldn't interest you, I don't suppose. I won't keep you.' He moved away.

'Come back,' the sergeant said. Jack paused, half grinning. 'You're not trying to be funny, are you, Mr Lane?'

'Me?' Jack said. 'Funny?'

'This is a serious matter to me,' the sergeant said. 'I might be able to make it serious to you, you never know. What about Sue Gribble?'

'Oh, nothing much,' Jack said. 'I saw her yesterday afternoon, that's all.'

'What time?' the sergeant said.

'I dunno,' Jack said. 'I hadn't got my sundial with me. It'd be – oh, three or four.'

'I want something nearer than that,' the sergeant said.

'Well,' Jack said. 'Let's see. It was – it was a bit before I stopped for my tea. About a quarter to four.'

'Where was this?' the sergeant said.

'In our yard,' Jack said.

'What, Dimfold?' the sergeant said.

Jack nodded. 'I was in the loft,' he said. 'Over the barn. I waved to her.'

'I'll take that as read,' the sergeant said.

'What do you mean?' Jack said.

'Did she wave back?' the sergeant said.

'No,' Jack said. 'I don't know if she saw me. She came in from the road, and –'

'You didn't have an appointment with her, by any chance?' the sergeant said.

'A *what*?' Jack Lane said.

'A date,' the sergeant said. He opened the door and got out of the car.

'Now look here,' Jack said. 'What are you getting at?'

'Nothing,' the sergeant said. He overtopped Lane by six inches. His manner held a faint menace. 'Just asking a question.'

'Think I've gone in for cradle-snatching?' Jack said. He sneered.

'No,' the sergeant said. 'I asked you a question, that's all.'

'Well, the answer is no,' Jack said. 'I didn't, damn you.'

The sergeant nodded. 'Good enough,' he said. 'You didn't have an appointment with her. Right. Let's just run over it again, shall we? You were in the loft – right? It was half-past three or a quarter to four – right? You waved, but she didn't wave back. Where was she going?'

'Up the hill,' Jack said. 'How the hell should I know? For a walk.'

'She hasn't got back yet,' the sergeant said.

'I tell you I don't know where she was going,' Jack said. 'If you think I've anything to do with it, why don't you say so?'

'I told you, I don't think anything,' the sergeant said. 'I didn't mention anything to do with it. Come to that, what's "it"?''

'You're trying to tie me up,' Jack said. 'I can see your little game all right. Just because I've had a bit of bad luck –'

'You're talking in front of witnesses,' the sergeant said. 'I didn't mention your bad luck, as you call it, did I now?'

'I come forward with information,' Jack said, 'and this is all the thanks I get. Just because I saw the girl –'

'But you don't know where she was going?' the sergeant said.

'No,' he said desperately. 'She was going up the hill – towards Fletton. Why don't you try there?'

'You're not suggesting,' the sergeant said, 'that Sir Godfrey Fletton –?'

'I'm not suggesting anything,' Jack shouted. 'I'm through – finished.'

'Very good,' the sergeant said. 'And thank you, Mr Lane. If there's anything else we want we'll let you know. Good morning.'

He got back into the car. 'O.K.,' he said to the driver. 'I think we'll try Dimfold first. See if we can find any traces. Helliwell, you follow.'

The car moved away, Helliwell after it on his bicycle. The sergeant said to the driver, in a tone of quiet satisfaction: 'Put the fear of God into that twerp, anyway.'

The driver laughed. 'Ah,' he said. 'You did an' all.' He scratched his nose. 'Might have summat to do wi' it, at that,' he said.

'You're right,' the sergeant said. 'He might, at that.'

When anything new dropped into the sty, Jukes' instinct was to snuffle over it, push it about with his snout, cover it with mud, and roll on it. His curiosity was fired now. A young girl had disappeared; the youth she affected worked for a baronet, who lived in a Hall: to an ardent reader of the less sober Sunday press (Sam's copy used to last him all week, conned over through a pair of steel-framed spectacles at nights, in the kitchen) such a concatenation of circumstances was irresistible. It roused again all his original feelings about Fletton, which had been rather damped by Helliwell, so that he had if anything welcomed the chance of delivering the Hall ration through Sue Gribble.

Now she had gone; he had to do the delivery himself. The fact that there was no meat owing to the Hall gave him only a moment's pause. He nipped back to the shop, selected a couple of fine juicy kidneys, put them in his basket, and set off up the drive. He had no notion of finding anything, or of accomplishing anything in particular; he experienced the same dumb excitement, anticipation, that he would have had setting off to gaze, avidly, at a pond from which a body had been dragged. It was pure romance that drew him on.

He left his bicycle at the lodge, and wheezed his way up

the curving slope, now sodden and messy with dead grass and fallen leaves. At the top, being an elderly man who had been in trade all his life, he went straight on past the house into the yard. Young Ted was there, alone, tinkering with the engine of the old generating set. The butcher stopped and stood looking at him. Gradually Ted became aware of the butcher. He looked round.

'Hallo,' he said. 'Want summat?'

The butcher shook his head, staring.

'Well, shove off then,' Ted said. He turned back to his job. The butcher did not move. Ted came round again. 'I said shove off,' he said. 'Don't you know this is private?'

Jukes looked at him in silence. His little globular eyes shone moistly.

Ted shrugged his shoulders. 'O.K.,' he said. 'Stick there, if you want.'

As he turned away, the butcher spoke. 'Where's Sir Godfrey?' he said

'How should I know?' Ted said. 'Down in t'chapel field, most like.'

The butcher said: 'Ah.' Ted wrenched at the machine with a spanner. 'Heard about Sue Gribble?' the butcher said. Ted became still; the scraping of the spanner ceased.

'What about her?' he said.

'She's run off,' the butcher said.

'So what?' Ted said slowly.

'Nowt,' the butcher said. 'Thought you might like to know, like.'

The boy dropped the spanner; he stood up, and turned about.

'What made you think that, Mr Jukes?' he said.

'I don't know,' the butcher said. 'I just thought.'

Fletton came into the yard, round the greenhouses. He paused at the sight of Jukes, then came on. He was in a bad mood; that morning the boy irritated him, hanging round the house, messing about with the generator in which Fletton had not the slightest interest, ignoring hints to come

into the fields, and generally behaving in a way that jangled his nerves for no clear reason. He would not give a direct order, because orders had never entered into his relationship with Ted; orders would have made it official, created a superior-inferior obligation. He had no such inhibitions about the little fat man, whom he had never seen before.

'Who are you?' he said directly.

The butcher touched his forelock and scraped a foot; he was the son of a father dead many years, but in life a strict observer of the proprieties. 'Name of Jukes, sir,' he said. 'Sam Jukes, the butcher.'

'What do you want?' Fletton said.

Jukes was ready for this: he brought his basket forward. 'Brought you a couple o' kidneys, Sir Godfrey,' he said.

'Why?' Fletton said.

That was more difficult, but still answerable. 'Thought you might be able to do wi' em,' he said. 'They're tasty, arc kidneys,' he added. 'Off the ration, too.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' Fletton said. 'Who says I want any bloody kidneys? Is this your idea?' he said to Ted.

'No, Captain,' Ted said promptly. 'Nowt to do wi' me.'

'All right,' Fletton said. 'Clear out then.'

The butcher could not let it go at that; he said the first thing that occurred to him. 'It's the girl,' he said. 'That's why I came mysen.'

Fletton stared. 'What girl?' he said.

'Sue Gribble,' the butcher said. 'She's run off.'

'Are you crazy?' Fletton said. 'What are you talking about?'

'Jim Gribble's girl,' the butcher said. 'She's skipped.'

'All right,' Fletton said. 'You win. Gribble's girl's skipped, so here's a couple of kidneys. Get out,' he shouted suddenly. 'And take your damned kidneys with you.'

The butcher jumped. He began to move away, then stopped. 'You could grill 'em,' he said. 'On a bit of toast -'

'Get out,' Fletton said deeply. He went. Fletton passed a

hand over his eyes, standing irresolute. Then he said to Ted: 'I'm going down to the field.'

'O.K., Captain,' Ted said. 'I'll get on with this. Reckon I can make something of it, with a bit of luck.' He turned back to the generator. Fletton walked away, frowning, and Ted wiped his forehead.

He was nervous. He had not been able to reach Sue, with Fletton prowling restlessly about; he expected every moment to hear her voice calling, or to see her appear at the door. Without raising his head he watched Fletton drift irresolutely out of sight round the corner of the stables; waited a few moments, then put down the spanner and made for the pump, as if to get a drink. From the pump he could see the outer yard: it was empty. He ran over to the corner and peeped round it. Fletton was not in sight. He went further, to the balustrade, and saw him walking along the chapel path, below, kicking moodily at stray pebbles.

He felt that this was his chance, now or never: darted back for the packet of bread and cheese he had left in the forge, and into the house: through the kitchen, and up the back stairs. He was half-way up when there was a loud knocking at the front door. His first impulse was to go on; then he thought that with strangers about the grounds Fletton himself would most probably be back, his own absence would be discovered, and –

He went on, put the packet on the floor on the landing, and ran down the main staircase. As he did so the knocking was repeated. He opened the door. Helliwell said: 'That's the lad, sergeant.'

'Oh, is it?' the sergeant said. 'You're Ted Sloan, are you? Is Sir Godfrey Fletton anywhere about?'

His tone was rougher than usual; it gave Ted a needless pang. In fact, it was directed at Helliwell. The sergeant had left his car and driver, with Helliwell's bicycle, at the Dimfold end of the lane, and had begun by making casual enquiries at the farm. Or rather, it had been his intention that they should be casual.

He had found the depressed and colourless Mrs Lane in her kitchen, and had said good morning, smilingly; to which she had replied without a smile, wiping her hands on her apron. At this point old Lane, in bed upstairs, had intervened, shouting: 'Who is it?'

'It's the police, John,' she called back, reedily.

'Who?' he bellowed.

She dropped her hands in a gesture of despair and went to the foot of the stairs. 'The police,' she screamed. 'Sergeant Thomas, from Stewbury.'

There was a brief silence above: the appearance of the police at that house meant one thing: trouble for Jack. By this time the sergeant was wishing he had not come. He had expected old Lane to be out in the fields, not tigerishly lying in wait. They heard the old man groan; then he said quite clearly: 'God damn and blast.'

Mrs Lane glanced deprecatingly at the two policemen, and called up the stairs: 'Shall I bring them up?'

'No,' the old man shouted. 'Let 'em stay where they are. What do they want?'

A long and painful interchange ensued. When the sergeant tried to sustain his own side of the interview, old Lane refused to hear, shouting: 'What's he say?' And Mrs Lane would be forced to scream it out again. The sergeant and the constable both knew that this would not have happened had Helliwell been by himself; which annoyed the sergeant, not only because it made him look a fool in his subordinate's eyes, but also because it lent weight to his private conviction that Helliwell was too easy, and would rather let himself be put off than disturb his good relations with his flock. Apart from that the whole business was unconvincing: if the girl had been in the habit of coming to Dimfold every day all the answers would still have been no.

Therefore the sergeant's brow was dark as he and Helliwell trudged up the hill, still bent on 'finding traces.' 'Damned old fool,' he said, referring to Lane.

'He was worried,' Helliwell said pacifically.

'Maybe he'd reason to be,' the sergeant said.

'He's had a lot of trouble,' Helliwell said. 'You know what young Jack is.'

'He'll have more before he's done,' the sergeant said. 'Going on like that.'

Helliwell made a mistake. 'I'll try again later,' he said. 'If you like.'

The sergeant stopped. 'So you think you could handle them better, do you?' he said.

'No, sergeant,' Helliwell said hastily. 'Course not. It's just - well, you know. It frightens 'em, seeing a strange face.'

'If *you* frightened 'em a bit more,' the sergeant said, 'it might be a good thing. I'll give you a bit of advice,' he went on, warming up. 'It doesn't pay to be too friendly.'

'Now look, sergeant,' Helliwell said.

'Never mind,' the sergeant said. 'Least said, soonest mended. But don't get the idea I'm blind, that's all.'

Helliwell took a deep breath. Then he said: 'No, sergeant.'

They went on up the hill, finding nothing. At the top the sergeant said: 'That's Fletton Hall in there, isn't it?' Helliwell said it was. 'Is there a way in from this end?' the sergeant said.

'You can get over the wall,' Helliwell said doubtfully.

'Come on then,' the sergeant said. 'We might as well check on the Sloan lad while we're here.'

'It's not a proper path,' Helliwell said.

'Well, it doesn't matter, does it?' the sergeant said. 'We've wasted enough time already. I don't suppose Fletton'll mind if we save some. Where's the place?'

They crossed the stepping stones and climbed the wall. The sergeant led the way along the path. Helliwell sought desperately for the right words. Between the sergeant's present temper and the fact that he had never reported the business of the flask, he felt as though precipices yawned on either hand.

'Sergeant,' he said at last. The sergeant grunted. 'Sir Godfrey -' Helliwell said, and paused.

'What about him?' the sergeant said, striding on.

'He's a bit -' Helliwell said. 'You know - queer tempered, like.'

The sergeant stopped and faced him. 'Have you had some trouble with him?' he said.

'No,' Helliwell said. 'Oh no. Course not. I thought I ought to mention it, that's all.'

'You think I will?' the sergeant said. 'That's it, is it?'

'No,' Helliwell said. He himself was getting a little tired. 'I thought it was my duty to tell you.'

The sergeant stared at him. 'I see,' he said at last. 'All right.' He turned and went on without another word. He was still fuming when Ted opened the door, but not so much as to forget Helliwell's warning altogether. He asked if Sir Godfrey was about

Ted shook his head, mouth open. Instinct and his father's blood produced an oafish look.

'He isn't?' the sergeant said. 'Where is he, then? Away?'

'No,' Ted said. 'Down in t'fields.' He gestured away to the right.

'Then why didn't you say so the first time?' the sergeant said.

'You said -' Ted began,

'Never mind what I said,' the sergeant said. 'Go and find him,' he said to Helliwell. 'And tell him I'm interrogating this boy.'

Helliwell began to descend the steps, then stopped. 'Which way is he?' he said to Ted.

Ted pointed. 'Down t'second stair,' he said. 'By t'chapel.'

'Go on,' the sergeant said irritably. 'Get a move on. Wasting time.'

Helliwell went, and the sergeant eyed Ted, who looked back with some apprehension, gathering himself to lie.

'So,' the sergeant said, 'you're Ted Sloan.'

Ted nodded.

'How old are you?' the sergeant said.

'Seventeen,' Ted said.

'Got your identity card?' the sergeant said. Ted looked blank. 'All right,' the sergeant said. 'We'll check that. You look older to me.'

Ted said nothing. The sergeant got down to business. 'Now listen,' he said. 'I'm investigating the disappearance of the girl Sue Gribble.' A puzzled expression appeared on the boy's face. 'Sue Gribble,' the sergeant repeated. 'You know her, don't you?'

Ted nodded. 'Girl from t'grocer's,' he offered.

'That's it,' the sergeant said. 'Well, she's gone away. See?'

'Where to?' Ted said.

'That's what we're trying to find out,' the sergeant said. 'You don't know, do you?'

Ted shook his head. 'Me?' he said.

'They tell me – down in the village –' the sergeant said. '– you've been walking out with her. Is that right?'

Ted swallowed. He thought rapidly. He had not known that anyone would connect him with Sue. 'Aye,' he said. 'I've walked her out a few times.'

'Good friends, are you?' the sergeant said.

Ted grinned slyly. 'Bit o' fun, like,' he said.

'I see,' the sergeant said. Boy's half-witted, he thought. 'You don't know where she's gone then?' he said. 'Or why she'd go without saying anything to her father?'

'She wouldn't tell *him*,' Ted said.

'Oh,' the sergeant said, 'why not?'

'She wouldn't,' Ted said. He shook his head. This fitted in completely with the sergeant's own ideas on the subject. 'When did you see her last?' he asked.

Ted gazed into distance. 'Oo,' he said, '– week ago, I reckon.'

'Why didn't you tell your mother you knew the girl?' the sergeant said.

Ted chewed a finger. 'Nowt to do wi' her,' he suggested eventually.

The sergeant suppressed a smile. 'You don't know why she'd have been walking along the Dimfold lane in this direction, yesterday?' he said.

Ted's heart missed a beat, she'd been seen then. He looked bewildered. 'Dimfold?' he said slowly.

'You don't know if she ever walked out with Mr Jack Lane, do you?' the sergeant said.

Ted shook his head. 'Mr Lane?' he said. 'He knows all the girls, I reckon.'

'Maybe,' the sergeant said. 'Did he know Sue Gribble, that's the point.'

Ted's head went on shaking. 'I don't know,' he said.

'I see,' the sergeant said again. He saw quite clearly, in his own mind, that wherever the girl had gone, Ted Sloan knew nothing about it. He discounted Jack Lane's story of having seen her walking towards Fletton: if she had wanted to go to the Hall, why should she have gone round by Dimfold? She might well have been *at* Dimfold: in which case Jack's story would have been cover for himself, for some reason; but if she had been running away – which was the sergeant's theory – it was far more likely that she had merely called at Dimfold *en route*, and then gone on. He decided that the obvious thing to do was to circulate the girl's description and await results.

At this moment Fletton, followed by Helliwell, appeared round the far corner of the house; and Jack Lane, carrying a milk bottle, came up from the drive. Fletton was walking fast; Helliwell, behind him, was plainly flustered. The sergeant, half-turned in that direction, saw them first; he faced about fully, thinking: trouble; and waited. He then saw Fletton become aware of Jack Lane, and turned further to discover what had taken his attention. From his position under the portico, he looked down interestedly on their meeting.

Fletton said: 'Oh, it's you.' Fresh from his brush with

Helliwell, and ripe for his encounter with the sergeant, he found it an effort to be civil. At the same time, he owed Jack a favour. The sergeant noted the effort.

Lane said: 'Fletton.' He raised the milk bottle in greeting and added: 'Just brought your milk.' He was embarrassed by the presence of the two policemen; if he had known they were there he most certainly would not have come. The sergeant noted the embarrassment.

Fletton said: 'That's decent of you. But why you?'

Lane said: 'The old man's queer – and the girl's not – available.' For the life of him, with the sergeant just above him, he found it impossible to refer to Sue naturally. The sergeant noted his hesitation.

Fletton said, without thought: 'What girl?'

Lane said, glancing upwards: 'Young Sue Gribble – that usually brings it.'

Fletton frowned. He said: 'Oh.' First kidneys, then policemen, now the milk, was a rough approximation to the thought behind the frown. He could not rid himself of a suspicion that some kind of elaborate joke was being played on him. The sergeant noted the frown.

Fletton put the thought behind him. He said: 'Well, thanks, anyway.' He took the milk. 'Sorry I can't make you more welcome.' He looked at the two policemen. 'Come again sometime.'

Jack Lane said, 'Thanks, I will.' He glanced at the policemen and made off towards the drive. The sergeant, putting two and two together, watched him go. As the answer to his sum, four seemed too obvious and too easy; he would have sworn that behind the casual dialogue there was something hidden, something that just did not quite meet the eye. He turned thoughtfully to meet Fletton mounting the steps. Mrs Sloan, coming towards the house, passed Lane as he plunged down into the drive. She saw the group under the portico; already breathless, she increased her pace.

Fletton said brusquely to the sergeant, in his best army manner: 'Well, sergeant. What's the trouble?'

'No trouble, sir,' the sergeant said. 'Thinks he's going to boss me, does he?' he thought.

'I gather you want to question this boy?' Fletton said. 'What about?'

'I've already completed my questioning, sir,' the sergeant said, stiffly. He was aware of Helliwell, a few steps below, two ears under a peaked cap.

'Yes,' Fletton said. 'But that doesn't answer *my* question, sergeant.'

Mrs Sloan, passing behind the sergeant, took up a position alongside Ted.

'I'm satisfied, Sir Godfrey,' the sergeant began, 'so far as the boy's concerned -'

'Maybe,' Fletton broke in. 'But I'm not. It seems to me that as the boy's employer, any interrogation -'

'Excuse me, sir,' the sergeant said. 'I sent Constable Helliwell to tell you I was here as a matter of courtesy. It wouldn't have struck me that as the boy's employer' - he emphasized the word - 'you would be interested in this business -'

'I appreciate the courtesy,' Fletton said, ironically. 'And I gather from your tone that you're making some imputation which escapes me at the moment. But let that go for the time being. If the boy's employer has no rights in the matter, what about his mother here? Do you usually question a minor without witnesses?'

That struck home; the sergeant flushed. 'I assure you, sir -' he began.

Mrs Sloan interrupted him. 'It's that Sue Gribble, sir,' she said. 'The nasty little baggage. She's flitted, as who wouldn't wi' that father of hers, and the whole rotten lot on 'em's all set to blame it on our Ted.' She took Ted's arm; he looked acutely uncomfortable.

'The boy has already admitted -' the sergeant said.

'Admitted?' Fletton said. 'Under questioning? - in private?'

'What's ta been saying?' Mrs Sloan said to Ted. She

shook his arm. 'Can't ta keep thi mouth shut, tha little fool?'

He pulled his arm away. 'Leave me be,' he said roughly. 'I've walked her out. So what?'

'That man's lass?' she said unbelievably. 'When tha knows -?'

'Oh, shut up,' he said.

Unnoticed, Gribble came up out of the drive and crossed the terrace.

'And what do you expect to make of that?' Fletton said to the sergeant. 'He's been out with the girl. Is that a crime?'

'No one's said it's a crime, sir,' the sergeant said, holding down his temper. 'If I may say so, I think your attitude is unfortunate -'

'You do?' Fletton said.

'A girl has disappeared,' the sergeant said. 'It's my duty -'

'Where is she?' Gribble said, panting. 'Ave you found her? 'As that young whelp told you where she is?'

There was a brief pause, while the group assimilated him. Mrs Sloan stood before Ted, shelteringly.

The sergeant said: 'He has not.'

Fletton said, with dangerous pleasantry: 'Good morning, Gribble. Welcome to our happy home.'

Gribble said again: 'Where's my girl?'

'I gather,' Fletton said to the sergeant, 'that Mr Gribble thinks she's here. He's not giving the game away by any chance?'

'I don't follow you,' the sergeant said.

'It wasn't your idea too?' Fletton said.

'Now look, Sir Godfrey -' the sergeant said.

'You look,' Fletton said. 'And you -' to Gribble - 'and you -' to Helliwell. 'This is a private estate. Private, you understand. Since early morning I've had the butcher, the baker, and the bloody candlestick-maker ploughing about badgering me with questions about this girl. I don't know where she is, do you get that? This boy doesn't know where she is. He appears to be the usual scapegoat of every blun-

dering bobby in the neighbourhood that's got nothing better to do -'

'What do you mean by that?' the sergeant said.

'Ask your bodyguard,' Fletton said, gesturing at Helliwell. 'All I'm saying is this: if I hear of any further persecution of him or his mother I shall instruct my solicitors to see that they're protected. And if *you*' - he said to the sergeant - 'have some thick-skulled idea that the girl's here -'

Goaded past endurance, the sergeant said: 'Would it surprise you to know that she was last seen by your boundary wall, walking in this direction, yesterday afternoon?'

'Ah,' Fletton said. 'Thanks. Now you're in the open. Now we know where we are. Well, take this in: if you want to ask any more questions, come back with a warrant. Search the place. And see where it gets you. Because I'll break you for it as sure as you've got those three pretty stripes on your sleeve. See?'

The sergeant eyed him for a moment, quite pale. Then he said to Helliwell: 'Come on. I want a word with you.' They went down the steps together.

Gribble said to Mrs Sloan: 'And I'll 'ave a few words with you.'

'Be careful what they are,' Fletton said contemptuously. 'And get out.'

Gribble went too.

'Are you going to start early to-day?' Fletton said to Mrs Sloan. His tone was kindly.

'No,' she said. 'I'll be getting back. Miss Harriet just let me come -' Her voice failed her. She felt for his hand and held it between hers, patting it. She turned and went off down the drive, wiping her nose. Fletton and Ted watched her go, then Fletton said: 'Well, let's get on with that field.'

This time Ted went with him. There was nothing else he could do.

Later in the day, Fletton caught Ted and Sue, leaving. 'What - the - bloody - hell?' he said. 'Who's this?'

'It's – Sue,' Ted said, swallowing. He had hold of her hand. 'Sue Gribble.'

'My God,' Fletton said. 'She's been here – all the time?'

Ted nodded. 'Up in t'attic,' he said.

'My God,' Fletton said again. 'And I said – that sergeant –' His lips twitched. 'My God. You young devil –' He began to laugh, quietly. Ted and Sue laughed too, though they tried not to, for good manners' sake. Then Fletton said: 'O my God. I haven't laughed so much since –' He became serious. 'Do you realize what you've got me into?' he said.

Ted nodded again. 'That's why I'm taking her away,' he said. 'If they come back –'

'They won't come back,' Fletton said. 'Where are you taking her to?'

'I don't rightly know,' Ted said. 'I thought – maybe one o' t' places in t' Rents –'

'They'd pick you up to-morrow,' Fletton said. 'You'll have to go back to your father,' he said to Sue.

She stared at him wide-eyed. 'Don't you want to?' he said. She shook her head, holding Ted's hand to her. 'Oh,' he said, 'like that, is it?' He looked at her favourably: he liked her round innocent child's face. 'My God,' he said. 'You're a pretty pair of scoundrels. You want to get married, I suppose? Is that it?' Ted looked uncomfortable; she smiled.

'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'One thing's certain – you'll never get away with it.' Poor kids, he thought, fat chance they've got. I don't know.

Suddenly he said: 'She can stay here the night, anyway. Till we decide what to do.' Their faces lit up. 'But don't let your mother see her,' he said to Ted. 'And you' – to Sue – 'keep out of my way. I don't like people about the place.' She smiled at him, dimpling. 'Go on,' he said. 'Out of my sight.'

Neither of them dared mention the baby.

Chapter Ten



To set oneself apart from humanity it is, logically, necessary to be inhuman. Fletton was not inhuman. He was not even logical.

He had come to Fletton, cutting himself away from everything he knew, because he found the pressure of things known too much to bear. If he could stand apart, he thought, and choose his own time and his own occasion to make new contacts, he could keep those contacts at a distance and under control. He ignored the obvious: there are two parties to every contact; touch something, it touches you.

All contacts are dangerous, but the most dangerous, to a man who wishes to be free, are those into which kindness enters. Humanity and freedom are incompatible, but kindness fires a train, sows a seed, sets off a cycle of events which once in motion cannot be stopped. Warmth and growth are for practical purposes synonymous: each holds the other in itself. The warmed child returns to the fire.

Of all the new contacts Fletton had made, three were warmed by the presence of kindness. George and Mary Ames were kind to him, and so was Betty Walsh; and by that they made it certain that sooner or later they would find him asking for further kindness. He was kind to Ted Sloan, thus creating a credit in the boy's favour on which he could and did draw again.

And now Sue.

She can stay the night, he had said – as though the morning would reveal miraculously somewhere else for her to go. Of course she stayed. Nothing was said, no agreement was reached. She was there in the house, filling a void into which she fitted comfortably.

When Ted came back in the morning she was waiting for him at the top of the stair. She looked at him questioningly.

'What's up?' he said.

'Have I to go?' she said.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Where's t'captain?'

'I haven't seen him,' she said

'Well, he's not about,' he said. 'He must have gone down to t'field.'

'Hadn't you better ask him?' she said.

'What?' he said.

'About me?'

'No,' he said scornfully. 'He doesn't like questions, doesn't the Captain. You should have heard him with Helliwell, and that sergeant.' He grinned at the recollection. 'Gave it 'em proper.' He whistled and shook his head. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's see how you're getting on.'

He led the way upstairs. The little room was tidy, the bed made and the golliwog lying on it. He surveyed it proprietorially. 'All right, eh?' he said.

She nodded. 'It's nice,' she admitted. 'I was – a bit frightened, t'first neight, and when you didn't come in t'morning. But last neight, it was different – knowing t'Captain was down there, and that he didn't mind, and all. I didn't mind a bit.'

'Warm enough?' he said. Hearing himself ask the question filled him with a sudden emotion, a sense of wonder at his own imaginativeness and capacity for unselfish thought. He put his arm round her shoulders. She was surprised and pleased, but knew better than to show it.

'Mm,' she said. 'Well – I managed, with my coat.'

'I'll get you a stove,' he said. 'There's an owd 'un in t'stables – wants a bit of cleaning up, and some oil. I'll fix it.' He went over to the window and looked out on to the leads. 'It's all reight up here,' he said, satisfied.

She watched him with a different satisfaction, then the first thought recurred. 'But what'll t'captain say?' she said.

He turned. 'He won't care,' he said. 'He doesn't care what you do, long as you leave him alone.'

'Where's he live?' she asked. She was full of curiosity about Fletton; she had liked him very much, and did not entirely trust Ted's version. She wanted to know more.

'Who?' he said. 'T'captain? In t'coach-house.'

'Why?' she said.

He shrugged. 'I never thought,' he said. 'It's his place.'

'Show me,' she said. 'Go on.'

He was doubtful about this. 'I don't know,' he said.

'Go on,' she said again. 'You said he wasn't about.'

'All reight,' he said. 'But if he comes back, you clear out back up here, quick.'

'I will,' she promised. 'Come on.'

They went down again together. She peeped into the drawing-room: the sculptured overmantel fascinated her. She went across to it, and stood scandalized. 'Well,' she said. 'I never did. Look at 'em, all bare. Well. Fancy.' She turned on him. 'And don't you stand there staring, Ted Sloan.'

'I wasn't,' he said with truth. He gave the nymphs a disparaging look. 'Fat old cows. Come on.' He began to walk away; she lingered a moment, and reaching up ran the tips of her fingers along the flowing line of a naked back. They came away covered with dust; she wiped them down the side of her frock, then repeated the movement, feeling the line of her own body. She followed him thoughtfully. 'It was you wanted to come in here,' he said over his shoulder.

'I don't like it,' she said. 'It's too big, and' – she glanced back at the mantel – 'well, I don't like it, anyway. What's in there?'

'I told you before,' he said irritably. He was finding this sightseeing tour something of a strain, yet his subconscious pride in being free of the great house was such that he could not bring himself to forego it. 'It's t'library – dining-room first, and then t'library. You won't like them neither.' She didn't: the panelled heaviness of the first, and the bare

shelves of the second had no relation in her mind with the business of living.

'What's all t'shelves for?' she asked.

'Books, of course,' he said. 'What d'you think it's called a library for?'

'Oh,' she said wonderingly. A library to her was a van that visited the village every Thursday. She dismissed the subject as unprofitable. 'Let's see t'kitchen, then,' she said with renewed eagerness.

The kitchens startled and impressed her. The size of the ranges and the huge ovens took her breath away. She went from one to the other fingering knobs and pulling open doors with little sounds of surprise and incredulity. 'And mucky too,' she said in disgust. 'You couldn't cook in them – not like they are.'

'I tell you there's nowt cooked in here,' he said. 'We never use 'em. There's no water, anyhow.'

'Why not?' she said. 'Why isn't there?'

'Oh heck,' he said desperately. 'I don't know. Pump's not working, or summat.'

'Couldn't you mek it work?' she said.

'I might,' he said, 'if I wanted to. But who wants to? I've been mucking about wi' t'electric light, but captain's not bothering.'

'I would,' she said.

'Yeah,' he said. 'You would. Come on.'

He took her round the yard, and showed her Fletton's room; the forge; the generating plant; the greenhouses. She was not happy about the arrangements. She shook her head. 'It's not reight,' she said. 'Not for a gentleman like him. It wouldn't do for my feyther.' The implied antithesis escaped them both. 'And cooking on that thing –' She indicated the forge. 'It's not reight.' She shook her head seriously. 'What's he get to eat?' she asked.

'He gets his rations,' Ted said. 'You've been fetching 'em.'

'I know that,' she said. 'They're nowt. I mean, to eat.'

You couldn't live on them.' She spoke with the certainty of the grocer's daughter.

Ted scratched his nose. 'I never thought,' he said. 'Course, I've fetched him a thing or two now and again – rabbits and such. You know: that Ruby's picked up.' Ruby was his greyhound bitch. 'But he never bothers.'

'That's why he's so thin, then,' she said. 'He's clemmed.'

'He knows what he wants,' Ted said.

'No, he doesn't,' she said. 'He wants a bit of cossetting, that's what he wants.'

Something in her look disturbed him. 'Now look here,' he said in alarm. 'Don't you get starting owt –'

'You mind your own business,' she said. 'And leave me mind mine.'

'I'm telling you,' he said. 'My ma's up here every day. If she sees owt –'

'She won't,' she said calmly. 'Not that'll matter, anyhow.'

'What d'you mean?' he said with deep suspicion.

'Hark,' she said. 'First thing you want's some chicks.'

'Chicks?' he said.

She nodded. 'You can get a few chicks, can't you?'

'What for?' he said.

'Eggs, dafthead,' she said.

'Oh,' he said. 'Yeah. I can get 'em.'

'That's good,' she said. 'Then you can pen 'em up and let 'em scratch. Oo, and I know. There's a grey and black speckled hen in my feyther's –'

'Here, hold on,' he said. 'I'm not knocking off your old man's hens.'

'But it's mine,' she said. 'It was give me – last year – by the man as brings the butter.'

'You sure?' he said.

'Cross my heart,' she said. 'But you'd better not let my feyther see you.'

He grinned. 'I won't,' he said. 'I'll go later on. How many chicks d'you want?'

'Oh, half a dozen,' she said.

'I'll have to see Sanger,' he said. 'He can put me on – here,' he broke off, 'what's t'captain going to say to a lot of hens squawking about t'place?'

'He'll not say no to a fresh egg for his tea, will he?' she said.

'No,' he said doubtfully.

'All reight,' she said. 'Now I'm going back upstairs to put my thinking cap on. Bye.'

She went off across the yard. He watched her, puzzled. At the door she turned. 'And I'll tell you summat else,' she said. 'You'd best get these grates seen to. He'll not be wanting to be living out here with snow on t'ground.'

She went in. Ted frowned. Not for the first time recently he had an uneasy sensation that he was being guided in a direction in which he was not sure he wished to go.

Fletton developed something of the same feeling; not so strong, but growing stronger as the days went by. He knew, of course, that he should have done something about the girl, but he did nothing. It was easier to do nothing. In the light of her presence in the house, he would have found it awkward to explain his attitude to the sergeant; he would have looked a fool. She was coming to no harm where she was; and if she wanted to run away from Gribble, he had every sympathy with her – it was none of his business, anyway. Further, to have taken any action would have been to let Ted down. He did not want to let Ted down; he felt a certain – He shied away from the word 'responsibility'; though he had publicly admitted it. He liked Ted, and more than that he valued Ted's affection and respect, of which he was well aware. He had liked Sue's round little face, and her dimple. He had no idea what age she was: she was old enough to want to get married, old enough to look after herself. He still knew nothing of the baby. He only knew that there was life in the house, that something had entered into that hollow shell; that to look at it now was different

from looking at it before she was there; extraordinarily different to know that if you went in and shouted, someone would answer.

He let the whole thing drift. It was easier – and pleasanter. He said nothing, but for a time guiltily enjoyed Ted's increased assiduity of service.

Not only did he now bring the rations, the milk, and the paper; there was the chicken-run, the chickens, and the grey hen. There was the sweep's brush and its bundle of flexible rods that Fletton found him struggling with in the kitchen. There was the great coil of electric cable that arrived one afternoon in a jeep. True to his policy of non-involvement, Fletton asked only the most casual of questions about each in turn; but each time it seemed even to him more and more absurd to be casual about things so closely affecting himself. The questions he asked were mainly regarding origins: where did you get them, and isn't there something to pay. Now and again Ted would accept a few shillings, but normally his answers were shadowy and evasive, though he would sometimes show signs of embarrassment and eventually, over the cable, came out into the open.

'I didn't knock it off, if that's what you mean,' he said resentfully.

'All right,' Fletton said. 'All right. I only asked.'

'George Ledbury gave it me,' Ted said, unappeased. 'Over to Martinton. The Yanks left it in his twenty-acre. He'd no use for it, so he gave it me, cos I tipped him Bluebird at Doncaster.'

'I see,' Fletton said.

'No you don't,' Ted said, quite pale with the effort. 'You always think I knock things off.'

'I certainly do not,' Fletton said. 'I've never said –'

'I know I knocked off that flask –' Ted said.

'Ted,' Fletton said sharply. 'Be quiet.'

'O.K.,' Ted muttered. He added something about 'not fair.'

'What's not fair?' Fletton said. 'Come on. What's not fair?'

'Not letting a chap put hisself right,' Ted said. 'How'd you feel -?'

'All right,' Fletton said. 'Come on then. Out with it.'

Then, having got so far, Ted had difficulty. He mumbled, scarlet-faced. 'Never done owt else like it,' Fletton understood him to say. 'Wouldn't have done it then. Had a couple of goes at the stuff in it, didn't know what he was doing.' He came to a tongue-tied stop.

Fletton, almost as uncomfortable, said: 'Well, do you think I didn't know all that? I'm sorry I left it about.'

'T'door was open,' Ted said. 'Just came in to have a look round.'

'And a fat lot of good it's done you bringing it up now,' Fletton said gruffly. 'Now drop it.'

Ted reached the depths of unmanliness. 'It was Sue made me,' he mumbled.

'Made you take the flask?' Fletton said, shocked.

'No,' Ted said. 'Made me bring it up.'

'Oh,' Fletton said. 'She did, did she? All right, now forget it.' He patted Ted on the shoulder.

So it was Sue, he thought. And Sue's grey hen. And no doubt Sue's idea to sweep the kitchen chimneys. He had been pretty sharp about that: 'You're wasting your time,' he had said to Ted. 'I'm not living in there, so don't you think it -' but Ted had finished the job, he knew. All Sue.

Considering that he had never set eyes on her since she had come into the house, she certainly had a - a pervasive quality. Things, things generally, had become easier, more comfortable, since her arrival; and setting one beside the other, adding them up, it was all Sue.

He had been amused and exasperated by Mrs Sloan; he was amused and interested by the unseen Sue's manoeuvrings. They were so much more subtle, more selfless, more innocent, in an odd way: like the transparent subtlety of a child. He stood back and watched, and did what he could

to further her designs without open intervention. Finding Ted cleaning the old oil-stove in the forge, he knew immediately its purpose. 'You'll want oil for that,' he said; and put a ten-shilling note down on the bench, walking away. That evening, after dusk, he circled the house until he found a spot from which he could see a glimmer of light, just above the parapet, at the north-east corner. He smiled, and went to bed. It was pleasant to see the house lit, even so meagrely.

Yet he never saw her, and they never spoke of her. After a time Fletton would have liked to speak of her, but some idiotic diffidence kept him silent, as though her presence had been divulged as a confidence he could not break. Instead he gave Ted money, until in effect he was paying him regularly, all in the peculiar wordless way they had developed. He was working hard and almost contentedly; the field was ready for planting, and he was now clearing timber, sawing and chopping, and the park was beginning to take shape. Besides which, as Ted said: 'T'wood'll come in for firing -' And again he felt the hidden hand, the innocent obvious directive.

The week before Christmas he took his first independent step. 'If we're going to plant tomatoes,' he said to Ted, 'we're going to want fuel. How do we get it?'

'T' fuel overseer's in Stewbury,' Ted said.

'Well,' Fletton said, 'next time you're in that direction, call in. Tell 'em you've come from me, and ask what about it. Can you do that?'

'Sure,' Ted said.

He came back with a sheaf of forms, which Fletton studied. He broke off in the middle, thinking, is this me? He took a sharp walk round the park, glancing up at the north-east corner, came back, and filled in the forms. Ted posted them.

On Christmas Eve Ted brought up a message from Mrs Ames. Would Captain Fletton come down for a bite of

dinner, next day? Fletton was touched, but he did not accept the invitation. He could not bring himself to face them: it would have been too awkward. It would have to be a casual unplanned meeting, when it came – He was so preoccupied, and disgusted, with his own cowardice that he failed to notice that this time its origins were different. 'Thank Mrs Ames very much,' he told Ted. 'Say – remember this – say I appreciate it no end, but I don't feel that I can. And wish them, both of them, a very happy Christmas. Have you got that?'

Ted nodded. 'O.K.,' he said. He sauntered off down the drive, hands in pockets, whistling 'Good King Wenceslas.' 'Captain says thanks,' he reported to Mrs Ames. 'He'd like to but he's not feeling so good. And he says Merry Christmas.' He came back with a piece of cake wrapped in a white napkin, and half a crown for himself. All parties were satisfied.

On Christmas Day Ted was in attendance at the Railway Arms, and Fletton was alone. He worked sporadically, without interest, until about three o'clock, and then came back to the house and put away his tools. There was nothing of Christmas about the weather; it was warm and damp under a grey sky; but he had a holiday feeling in his blood. He blew up the fire in the forge, and put on a kettle of water. He washed himself under the pump, and made tea. He put the teapot and two cups, milk and sugar and Mrs Ames' cake on a piece of board, and carried it into the house. He laid it down at the foot of the stairs, went up three steps, and called: 'Hallo.'

His voice raised a faint echo; there was no answer. He called again: 'Hallo there.'

This time he thought he heard a sound, the creak of a board, or a rusty hinge. 'Sue,' he called. 'Sue Gribble.'

A scared voice answered, distantly: 'Who is it?'

'Only me,' he called back. 'Fletton.'

There was a pause, and then the voice said: 'Oh.' It seemed uncertain.

'I've come to tea,' he called. 'May I come up?'

There was a longer pause; the voice said, still more uncertainly: 'If you like.'

He picked up his tray, and went on up the stairs. At the top he was lost; he looked helplessly right and left, and called again: 'Which way?'

'Here,' the voice said; there was a far-away scuffling of feet on an uncarpeted stair. He faced left, and she appeared at the corner of the cross passage.

'Oh, there you are,' he said. 'I couldn't make out - it's the first time I've ever been up here.' She neither answered nor moved, but just stood looking at him doubtfully. 'Well,' he said. 'Aren't you going to ask me up?'

'Oh,' she said. 'Yes.'

'Then lead on,' he said. 'The tea's getting cold.' He shook his tray at her so that the cups chinked together and a little milk slopped over the spout of the jug. She turned and preceded him along the corridor and up the stairs. At the door of the room he stopped as a thought struck him. 'I say,' he said, 'you don't mind me coming into your room, do you?'

She shook her head.

'I mean,' he said, 'a young lady - sometimes a young lady mightn't care to have a man in her room. I'll go again, if you like.'

'Oh no,' she said. She stood back.

'I got a bit browned off,' he said, going in. 'I got to thinking about Christmas, and then I thought, there's two of us, anyway. We might as well wish each other a Merry Christmas. What do you say? Merry Christmas?'

She smiled. 'Merry Christmas,' she said.

'Fine,' he said. He put the tray down on the floor, straightened himself, and looked round. It was growing dusk; the little oil stove, in a corner, threw a red glow on the ceiling; the room reeked of paraffin. 'So this is where you've been hiding?' he said.

She nodded. 'There's a chair,' she said suddenly. She

passed him, and pulled the chair forward, dusting the seat with her hand. 'It's a bit rocky,' she said.

'Fine,' he said. 'Where are you going to be?'

'I'll sit on t'bed,' she said. She did so; he risked the chair.

'Suppose you pour the tea,' he said. 'And there's some Christmas cake in that cloth. Mrs Ames sent it to me.'

She knelt by the tray, and saw the teapot, the enormous teapot that had stood on the top shelf in the shop as long as she could remember. 'Ee,' she said. 'That pot'

'Bit big, isn't it?' he said cheerfully. 'Only one I've got, I'm afraid.'

'I'm that ashamed,' she said

'What on earth for?' he said. 'It's my pot.'

'It used to be ours,' she said. 'It was in t'shop for years and years.'

'Was it?' he said. 'Well, never mind it, anyway. Let's try the tea.'

She said no more, but poured out two cups of tea. He picked up the packet of cake, unwrapped it, and cut it carefully into two pieces with his penknife. He took his cup and passed her a piece of cake in exchange. They sat back.

'Good cake,' he said.

She nodded with a full mouth.

'What on earth do you do with yourself up here all day?' he asked.

'I'm not -' she said, and caught herself up

'What's the matter?' he said. 'Come on. Tell me.'

'It's just -' she said. 'I didn't know - I thought you might be mad at me, making free wi' your house, like.'

'My dear child,' he said. 'You can do as you like in it. I don't use it. I've told you, this is the first time I've been upstairs even.'

'Why?' she said.

'I - I don't know,' he said laughing. 'You've got me. I've thought about it now and again, but I just never got round to it, I suppose. What do *you* think of it?'

'It's ever so grand,' she said. 'Shouldn't like to live in it though.'

'Why not?' he said.

'It's not for me to say,' she said primly.

'Oh, yes it is,' he said. 'Why not?'

'I dunno,' she said. 'It's – it's too big, like. You'd have to be born in it to get used to it.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'That's exactly what I felt. So you see, we agree.'

'You're used to it,' she said. 'The likes of it, any rate.'

'I'm certainly not,' he said. 'You've got me wrong, Sue.'

'You're a gentleman,' she said.

'Am I?' he said.

'Course,' she said, with a touch of scorn. 'Anybody can tell that.'

'How?' he said.

'Well,' she said, and stopped. 'You're having me on,' she said.

'I'm not,' he said. 'Honestly. I just wanted to know.'

'Anybody can tell a gentleman,' she said. She frowned, trying to put her thoughts into words. 'It's not what he says, and it's not what he looks – it's what he does, like.'

'What does he do?' he said.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I can't say it, when it comes to it. When – when a gentleman does owt, it's t'reight thing to do. He does it cause it's reight, and it's reight cause he does it.'

'I see,' he said thoughtfully. 'So that's a gentleman.'

She nodded. 'And he's kind, too,' she said. 'Like you,' she added.

'Me?' he said. 'Kind?'

'To me and Ted,' she said, almost inaudibly.

'My dear child,' he began. He cleared his throat. 'I'll tell you a story – about me. Shall I?'

'Oo, yes,' she said. 'I like stories.'

'Well, let's have another cup of tea first,' he said. He held

out his cup. She took it and filled it, and settled back on the bed.

'Where I was born,' he said, 'wasn't very nice. Just a lot of little poky old houses all thrown together in heaps. You've never seen a big town, I suppose?'

'I've been to Stewbury,' she said.

'No,' he said. 'Not like Stewbury. Big. Huge. Not rich, not very poor. Plenty of comfort, plenty of food. But everything poky: that's the best word I've got. It gets you down.' He sipped his tea. 'My dad was always hoping -'

He stopped. She watched him, fascinated and a little frightened by the bitterness in his voice. 'It's a rotten world, Sue,' he said at last. 'No mercy in it. No human kindness. And it won't leave you alone. That's the worst of it. It's on your tail all the time - But that's not the story,' he said. '*That* begins way back - what? nearly sixty years ago. It's a tale of true love - like a fairy tale. My grandfather was a young soldier, a lieutenant, and he fell in love with a shopkeeper's daughter - like you, Sue. *His* father was Sir Godfrey Fletton; he was Sir Godfrey's younger son, which meant that he didn't count much more than an animal in their scheme of things - less than some. Sir Godfrey threw him out when he married the girl. He had to resign his commission because of the scandal. Do you understand what that means?'

She shook her head.

'He couldn't be an officer any more - he wasn't fit. It let the side down. But all he knew was soldiering, so he enlisted as a common soldier. He was a good soldier, and he was hard and bitter. He rose to be a sergeant. He put his boy - my father - into the army too: drummer-boy and military school, and then the ranks. My dad was an odd sort of chap. In spite of all that he was neither hard nor bitter. He was charitable, and gentle, and full of hope. Nothing ever stopped him hoping - So what do you think he did?'

'He married above him. He married a shopkeeper's daughter. It was a love-match too. Another fairy tale. Life

is like a fairy tale – only the results are different. You don't live happily ever after. Private soldiers weren't much thought of before 1914; you couldn't get much lower. My mother's people were just about as scandalized by her marriage as my grandfather's were by his. They made her life hell, spoilt her and soured her. My dad grieved when she died, because he always saw her as she used to be. I never did. It was – quieter after she'd gone. And my dad plodded on, running the shop, and hoping that I –'

He broke off and rose with a sharp movement. He went over and stood by the window, looking at the dark panes.

'He hoped that I would bring everything right. Me. It was like a kind of dream he had. He called me Godfrey, and sent me to a good school. He was always hoping to hear from "the Family," as he called them.' He swung round again. 'It may sound like snobbery, but I swear to God, it wasn't,' he assured Sue. She stared back at him, understanding his distress, but none of the reason for it. 'He never heard a word. Why should he? There was no reason why he should. Even if they'd known how he felt there'd still have been no reason. And they didn't. All he went on was a blind faith in essential justice. Blind? Crazy.

'He was a little crazy, I think. What's called "not right in the head." That's what my mother's people thought. He couldn't do anything right: he was wrong when he married my mother, then he was crazy for crippling himself for my schooling. He was crazy when he encouraged me to take a commission in 1919. Just because he had titled relatives. Above himself, they said.

'I went to school every day, and was accepted. They're democratic, those schools. There's no personal discrimination. But I came home every night alone. I couldn't ask any of my friends to Diamond Street. That's where we lived – Diamond Street. All the streets round about were called after jewels. They were jewels all right – jewels in England's crown. I used to deliver the papers before I went to school.

Saturdays I served in the shop. And I'm not arguing about that. There's nothing wrong with it, God knows. But I daren't mention it at school. That's the point. I lived two separate lives and had no anchor in either.

'Then the war came, and it was the same thing all over again. I served my time in the ranks, went to an OCTU, and took a commission. I wasn't easy in the ranks, and no one was easy with me. I talked differently, acted differently. When I was posted, I hadn't been in the Mess two minutes before the Major said casually, "What'd you say your school was, Fletton?" You'd have thought I'd walked in singing the school song and he hadn't quite recognized it. I told him. He blew out a great whoof of relief and said: "That's all right, then. I was afraid for a minute you were one of these ranker fellas." The laugh was on him: I was. But I happened to have had a crazy father, so I was accepted again.'

He began to walk up and down, short, agitated paces. She followed him wonderingly with her eyes.

'I don't say I knew all this then – I knew it, but I didn't get it. It was later on that I had plenty of time to think it out – after I was taken. I was – captured – at Dunkirk.' He produced the last words as though they were ground out of him under extreme physical pressure. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face; sat down on the chair, elbows on knees. The glow of the stove threw his face into deep shadow; only his hands, projecting forward, lent expression to what he said. He gripped one with the other.

'A bomb dropped right alongside my truck – turned it over and threw me clear. Blew most of my clothes off at the same time. When I came to, things had quietened down a bit; moved away. I was half naked but not a scratch on me. The truck was on its side, wrecked. I crawled over to it. The driver was dead – more than dead. A good deal of him wasn't there. And I'd been sitting beside him.'

His hands moved slightly, loosed and tightened again.

'All the men in the truck were dead, but one. There were

two or three lying on top of him, but I could hear him muttering to himself. I pulled them off and found him. He had a frightful wound in the head – didn't know me. I bound it up, best I could, and waited. I didn't know, of course, that we were behind the German front. I couldn't have left him, anyway, in that state. And to move him seemed lunacy.'

His hands opened, rubbed together palm to palm, gripped again.

'I don't know how long that lasted. I suppose I was pretty badly shocked. Time was doing odd things – and I talked to people who had no right to be there: Dad mostly, but others as well. When they picked us up I thought at first they were people in my dream and didn't take much notice. A rifle butt brought me round. I was to get up, and move. I said "What about him?" They said, "Can he walk?" I knew what that meant. If he couldn't walk he could stay where he was. I couldn't leave him – it didn't seem right, though he'd probably have done better if I had. I said yes. I pulled him on to his feet and took his arm around my shoulders and he walked. He walked till he died, on his feet, during the night. Then I left him. The next day I was interrogated. And the first question –'

He beat one fist in the other palm.

' "What's your rank?" It was like being back home. I let it go. I let them work it out for themselves. I was a man. What the hell was rank? I told you I was shocked. They reached their own conclusion – the easiest: I was a private. And so I was a private from then on.

'I didn't take kindly to captivity. Every so often it would come over me, and I'd try again. God knows how many times I tried. Nothing planned: I'd just get up and try to go. There was no one to tell me I was sick: I didn't really know it myself till I got home and tried the same thing here. I just had to get away: from wire, from walls, from other people, from myself. Pretty soon they marked me down as incorrigible. I was moved further and further into Ger-

many. I landed up' – he gritted his teeth – 'at Sachsenhausen.

'They had the best method of the lot, there. Whips, they used. When you'd been beaten sufficiently, you *couldn't* run away. I was the only Englishman in the mine. The others were – Russians, Poles, Balts, what have you. I found out there what rank is, and what it is to be a man, just a man – owning nothing but that spark of life inside you that won't go out. It's not anything; not worth a damn. I longed to die.'

He rubbed his hands together, palm to palm. They slid easily over each other. They were wet. He took a breath.

'But I didn't. I came back. My father was dead. He hadn't heard a word from me. I'd just dropped out. I suppose his hope went with me. They'd buried him without even a stone over his grave. And his precious "Family" had gone too: David at Alamein, Godfrey somewhere in the desert, their father and mother in a raid on London. No stones for them either. I *was* the Family. All the fairy tale hopes come true: after all that I was *Sir* Godfrey. And by God it sickened me.'

He stopped, and was silent for a long time. Then he sighed, and took out his handkerchief. Not only his hands were wet; he was wet all over. The room took shape about him. He became aware of Sue, sitting motionless on her bed.

'So there you are,' he said. 'That's a gentleman. A tag attached to nothing.'

She sniffed, and wiped her eyes.

'Good God,' he said. 'Have I made you cry? What a fool I am.'

'It doesn't matter,' she said thickly.

'You poor kid,' he said. 'I've never put that into words before: then I have to choose you to listen to it. My idea of a Merry Christmas.'

'It doesn't matter,' she said again. 'I was sorry, that's all.'

'For me?' he said.

‘For everything,’ she said. ‘And everybody. It’s all – so silly – and so sad.’

She dreamed that night, and woke panting; but Fletton slept soundly, without a twitch. He might have been drugged.

Chapter Eleven

*

HE saw her no oftener. He did not try; but he thought a good deal about her. He could not analyse either the impulse that had made him unburden himself or the relief he had undoubtedly got from it. He felt shy of meeting her in open daylight: how silly, she had said. It was an aspect of himself that had not struck him before. He tried to see himself through her eyes. It was illuminating.

He went on with preparations for the spring, in spring-like weather. He and the Hall were left alone. Ted was his means of communication both with the inside world, represented by Sue, and with the outside.

Ted was maturing. He had responsibilities, and gained considerable prestige from his association with the Hall. He was not afflicted by any disabling imagination, self-doubts, or shyness. He dealt with Gribble offhand, enquiring after Sue in a considerate way that made the grocer's stomach contract with rage. He winked at Helliwell, when they met, saying politely, 'How do, Mr Helliwell?' so that the policeman's hands tingled to be about his ears. The only place where he was not completely on top of the world was in his own home. There had been one row, brief and unusually quiet.

'Behind my back,' Mrs Sloan had said bitterly, 'And wi' that man's lass, and all.'

'Oh, shut up,' he said.

'Me that's always been able to hold my head up'—' she said.

'Shut up, will you?' he said.

'And now he wants to see me,' she said.

'I'll see him,' he said. 'Settle him, what's more.' And later reported: 'You'll hear no more from Gribble.'

'Why?' she said. 'What's t^he done now?'

'Frightened him,' he said. ' "Captain's got his eye on you, Mr Gribble," I said, "you'd best go easy." And I paid him ten bob on account like.'

But she could not forget her disapproval any more than she could stifle her pride in his standing with Fletton, or in his new ability to settle her debts with money honestly earned. She compromised in a dignified hurt silence which lay over the place like a blanket, and which in any case made him far more uncomfortable than open warfare would have done.

Gribble himself was unhappy. He missed Sue. He was not particularly worried about her safety, believing as he did that she had run away; but his house was dirty, his meals slipshod and unappetizing. He was doing more work than he had done for years; and instead of sympathy in his loss, he got hostile looks and cold words. Not only the police but everyone else seemed to blame him, not only for Sue's disappearance but also for some shadowy wrong done to themselves. When he went to Helliwell about the theft of his grey and black hen, the policeman said heavily: 'Look, Jim, haven't you caused enough trouble?'

'Trouble,' he said. 'I like that. It's my 'en, isn't it -?'

'I don't doubt it,' Helliwell said. 'But if you'll take my advice you'll forget it. Sergeant's feeling pretty mad, I'll tell you.'

'An' that's justice,' the grocer said bitterly. 'First my girl, then my 'en -'

He went off muttering, but his thoughts were no blacker than Sergeant Thomas's. What should have been a perfectly normal routine enquiry had developed in the sergeant's mind into a kind of hue and cry in which for some inexplicable reason he himself had been the hunted instead of the hunter. The only person whom he had found in any way co-operative was the Sloan boy, a half-wit; and the man he blamed most for the whole fiasco was Helliwell. Helliwell was under a cloud; he had had to come out with the whole story of the flask, and the sergeant left him in no

doubt that he had been wrong in everything he had done. Obviously Ted Sloan was innocent; the onus for the whole business was on Fletton; if Helliwell had handled the thing right Fletton would have been in no position to cause further mischief. He went no further than that: 'don't expect me to clean up a bungled job six months old,' he said to the sweating Helliwell. He could think of no possible way of getting back at Fletton; all he could do was keep an eye on the place himself. So he would be seen at odd hours sitting in his car, glowering across the Square; or Jack Lane would look up to find him leaning over the gate of the yard, morosely and sceptically watching the work of the farm. Meanwhile, Sue's description appeared under the heading **MISSING FROM HER HOME** on the notice-boards of countless police stations up and down the country; while Sue herself, discovering for the first time the pleasures of the imagination, wandered contentedly about the upper floors of the Hall, peopling them with baronets and young lieutenants, fantastically unlike life. She was now very big, but she was not the worrying kind.

On a Sunday late in January, Mrs Sloan broke her ankle, coming down the steps of the church after evening service. Harriet Barnes, assisted by Jukes, lifted her into the Rectory; where Harriet diagnosed a sprain. To be on the safe side, and with the object of immobilizing the little woman, she put splints on the ankle and rang Dr Matthews, in Stewbury. The doctor saw no reason to turn out that night, but he arranged for the ambulance to pick Mrs Sloan up the following morning, and take her to Corby Cottage Hospital for X-ray. She was then, at her own insistence, carted home in a wheelbarrow, escorted by Constable Helliwell to make it official.

Ted found his mother in bed when he reached home just after nine. She was in some pain, close-lipped and very pale. He was enormously touched and rather frightened. He had never come near sickness before; indeed, it had never

entered his head that his mother of all people had any human weakness. He fussed round her, to her great satisfaction; brought her tea, made her breakfast in the morning, and announced that he was going with her in the ambulance. She herself sent him to let the Captain know that she would not be up – ‘for a day or two,’ she said; but Ted, giving his message, also expressed his own opinion that they’d be lucky if she was on her feet in a month. Fletton thought this might be exaggerated, but he agreed that it would be some time before she would be able to negotiate the drive.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘Tell your mother how very sorry I am, and that she’s not to worry. We’ll be all right.’ He paused, and added: ‘I’ll tell you what: perhaps Sue ’ud like to do a bit round the place?’

‘Aye, that’s reight,’ Ted said without thought. ‘Good idea, Captain. You tell her, will you? I’ve got to be off or I’ll miss the ambulance.’

When he had gone, Fletton gave Sue a call. Standing at the foot of the upper stairs, he told her. ‘If you’d like to come down, there’ll be no one about,’ he said.

‘I would that,’ she said. ‘I’ll get your dinner, if you want.’

‘Grand,’ he said. ‘Get your own at the same time, and we can keep each other company. Well, be seeing you. I’ve some clearing to do.’

He went off whistling. For once, he felt, things were looking after themselves: this might be the beginning of putting Sue back into circulation. He did not bother to follow the thought through. These were halcyon days for him: he had fought off his devils, and shaken off his would-be friends; he was choosing his own contacts, everything was fine.

The shock was all the greater. He saw her first across the yard: she waved to him from the door of the forge. Half-way through washing, he paused and frowned. There had been something – He shook the water from his eyes and looked again; but she had gone in. He dried himself, and when he

looked up she was coming towards him, walking slowly and heavily. There was no possible doubt about it.

'Dinner's ready,' she said, smiling. 'I've set t'table inside -' She stopped.

'Sue,' he said absurdly. 'Is there anything the matter with you?'

She glanced down at herself. A blush spread gradually from her neck to her forehead. 'Oh,' she said. 'You mean -' The shock was almost as great to her; as far as she was concerned he had seen her before; she had forgotten it was in near darkness. And now she had not been thinking at all -

'That's what I mean,' he said.

She hung her head. 'I'm going to have a baby,' she said.

'Good God,' he said. 'Is it - Ted?'

She nodded without looking up.

'So that's it,' he said. 'That's why you want to get married.'

'No it isn't then,' she said, with a flash of temper. 'It's nowt to do wi' it. No chap has to marry -' She recollected herself; her voice died away.

'Well,' he said grimly. 'It seems to me the sooner you're married, the better.'

'We can't,' she said, very low.

'Don't worry about your father,' he said. 'I'll handle him.'

'It's not him,' she said. 'It's me.'

'Now look, Sue,' he said. 'This ~~is~~ not the time for silly ideas -'

'It's not my fault,' she said, flashing again. 'I can't help it.'

'What are you talking about?' he said.

'I'm not the reight age,' she said. 'I haven't reached t'age of contentment, or summat.'

'You - what?' he said. 'Here - how old are you?'

'Sixteen,' she said ashamedly.

'And this -?' he said. He sat down on the edge of the

water-trough. 'O my God,' he said. He stared at the ground, then at her. 'Do you realize what this means?'

'We've just got to wait,' she said. She put a timid hand on his arm. 'But don't you worry,' she said. 'If t'baby starts to come I'll go somewhere else. I'll find somewhere.'

'You'll find somewhere,' he said helplessly. He stood up and took hold of her shoulders. He had to restrain himself from shaking her. 'Don't you realize this is – is –' – he stuttered – 'it's illegal. I'm not sure it's not a crime. It's serious.'

She began to cry. 'It's nobody's business but mine,' she blubbered. 'Mine and Ted's.'

'O God,' he said. 'Now I've made you cry again. Here. Take this.' He pushed his handkerchief at her. 'And stop it. It's too late for that now. We'll find some way out. Stop it, I tell you,' he shouted. He began to pace up and down.

She did her best. She blew her nose into the handkerchief and wiped her eyes. He came to a stand suddenly and struck his left palm with his right fist. 'I've got it,' he said. 'Thwaite's. The lawyers. Our Mr Andrew. They can do something useful for once in their lives. I'll go and see Mr Andrew.' He looked round for his jacket.

'What about your dinner?' she said. 'It's all ready.'

'Dinner?' he said, struggling with the jacket. 'I've no time for dinner.' He paused at the corner of the yard. 'Keep it warm,' he called. 'And by the way – when are you seventeen?'

'Seventh of July,' she called back

After he had gone, she cried again. The dinner would be spoiled, quite spoiled.

He caught the one fifty-five bus to Stewbury, changed there, and was in Corby at twenty minues to three. He asked a policeman for the offices of Thwaite, Thackel and Thwaite, and was directed to the Corn Exchange, a mid-Victorian brick building in bastard Gothic, with a band of white stone like a corset about its middle. The entrance was up

two shallow steps, between a multitude of dim brass plates. On one of these he deciphered the name of Thwaite: 2nd floor. He made his way up a dusty stair, the treads of which were bound with brass and inlaid with lino, both worn through and offering dangerous jagged edges to the feet. On the second floor landing, which was almost dark, a gas-jet hissed and spluttered. Here he found again the name of Thwaite, this time in ghostly semi-obliterated black on ground glass. He opened the door and admitted himself to a box about four feet square with another door on his left and in the wall opposite a glass panel with the words 'ENQUIRIES. RING!' There was no bell; he knocked on the glass and waited. Nothing happened. He knocked again. This time the door on the left opened. A girl, silhouetted against light behind her, one hand on the door and the other on her hip, said negligently in a high flat voice:

'Did you want something?'

'Mr Andrew Thwaite,' he said.

'Have you an appointment?' she said.

'No,' he said. 'But my business is urgent.'

'Mr Andrew's out,' she said.

'Well, I can wait,' he said. 'I'll wait till he comes back.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Well, I suppose you can if you like. Come in then.' She turned, leaving him to close the door, and preceded him across a cluttered office: a table with an old typewriter surrounded by a welter of papers, a fire in a dusty grate, before the fire a chair on which an open book called *Hearts are Trumps* lay face downwards.

The girl, clicking across the office on high heels, said over her shoulder: 'I don't know when he'll be back.' Her walk, a dip at the knees and a flick of the behind, fascinated Fletton. He said nothing. She opened a door beyond the fireplace, and let him pass her. She said again: 'I said I don't know when he'll be back, but you can sit down if you like.'

'Thanks,' he said.

'I'll poke up the fire,' she said.

He sat down in an armchair of cracked black leather, while she dipped past him again. She bent over the fire, exposing above her stocking four inches of bare leg and a straining suspender; rose again and dipped back to the door. At the door she turned, and striking her original pose, one hand on the door and the other on her hip, asked casually: 'What name was it?'

'Fletton,' Fletton said. He used his title, finding it strange in his mouth. 'Sir Godfrey Fletton.'

'Oh,' she said. She was impressed; she smiled, and raised the hand from her hip to her back hair. 'Yes. Sir Godfrey. I hope he won't be long, Sir Godfrey.' She began to close the door, then opened it again and said: 'If you want anything, shout, won't you?' The last thing visible as the door closed was her teeth. Fletton scratched his head and looked round him

The room was a little cleaner than the other, but not much; the fire a little brighter. The desk had rather fewer papers on it; there was a dusty Axminster carpet on the floor. Book-shelves and deed-boxes lined the walls; EXORS OF SIR GERVASE WALLABY; F. JONES; F. JONES again; and then a whole row - FLETTON.

He began to think about Sue and Ted Sloan, marshalling his facts. He had already decided to present the case to Thwaite as one in which a friend of his wanted advice: this with an idea of keeping not so much himself but Sue and Ted out of it, or at any rate anonymous, until he had found out just how they stood. He checked dates again, counting the months on his fingers; the baby must certainly have been conceived before Sue was sixteen. He had only the vaguest notion of the law respecting the age of consent; he believed it was sixteen but whatever it was, law or no law, he was determined that Sue should not suffer. As for Ted, for the first time he began to burn with indignation: what Ted needed was a damned good hiding, and for two pins or less -

There was an outbreak of noise in the other office, a

sharp sound like a smack, a high-pitched giggle from the girl, a male voice, laughing. Then silence. The door opened and a bulky young man came in. A whiff of beer came with him, but his red face was held solemn. He wore a brown suit, much too tight.

'Sir Godfrey Fletton?' he said. He held out a large hand. 'Glad to know you. I'm Thwaite – Andrew Thwaite.' They shook hands. 'Sit you down, sit you down,' he said. He stood in front of the fire, legs apart. 'Been expecting you for weeks – then out when you come. Damned shame.'

'I'm sorry I didn't let you know,' Fletton said. He felt rather dazed.

'Not a bit of it,' Thwaite said. 'Know what it is – getting back into harness.' He hiccupped slightly behind his hand. 'My place to do the apologizin', anyway.' His set expression slipped; 'I'm not usually as late as this,' he said explanatorily. 'Special occasion, rather. Celebration. Old Tommy Henderson – you know old Tommy: auctioneer – just had twins. Good show, what?'

'I don't know him,' Fletton said drily.

'You don't?' Thwaite said. 'Oh, you ought to meet old Tommy – one of the best, and a grand horseman too –'

'I should like to,' Fletton said. 'But –'

'I know,' Thwaite said. 'Another time.' He went behind his desk and sat down. 'You want to get down to business: the estate, what?'

'No,' Fletton said.

'Not the estate?' Thwaite said.

'No,' Fletton said. 'I want your opinion – on behalf of a friend.'

'A friend,' Thwaite said. 'Right. Fire away.'

Fletton looked at him. 'You *are* Mr Andrew Thwaite?' he said.

'I'm Thwaite all right,' the solicitor said. 'Why?'

'You're not quite what I expected,' Fletton said. 'That's all.'

'No, I'm not, am I?' Thwaite said. He grinned again.

'But I'm pretty bright when it comes to law, so don't worry.'

'I wasn't -' Fletton began.

'That's all right,' Thwaite said. 'Everyone feels the same. You'll get used to it. Let's hear about your friend.'

'Well,' Fletton said. 'It's like this. He has a protégée -'

'Female?' Thwaite said.

'A girl,' Fletton said. 'She's got into trouble -'

'They do,' Thwaite said. 'Amazing how they do. What's she after - an affiliation?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'I don't think you quite understand. You see, she's very young -'

'How young?' Thwaite said.

'She's sixteen now,' Fletton said.

Thwaite whistled. 'Under the age, eh?' he said. 'That's awkward. Father cuttin' up?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'He doesn't know.'

'But he'll have to know sooner or later,' Thwaite said.

'I suppose so,' Fletton said. 'That's not the point. What my friend wants to know is, what's the penalty?'

'Who for?' Thwaite said. 'Him?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'He doesn't come into it. For the girl.'

'Well,' Thwaite said, beaming. 'She's holding the baby, isn't she?' He slapped his desk and emitted a sharp squeal of laughter. 'Pretty good, that,' he said. 'Holdin' the baby, eh?' He sobered down under Fletton's eye.

'You mean,' Fletton said, 'there's no penalty, in law?'

'That's right,' Thwaite said. 'She's sinned against, not sinnin'. It's your friend - it's the other party that's got to look out. She, or her father, can sue -'

'Look,' Fletton said. 'I told you. My friend doesn't come into it, except that the girl happens to be in his house. Can she marry?'

'Not without her father's consent,' Thwaite said. 'She's a minor. The court could overrule the old man, of course - did you say the girl was in your friend's house?'

Fletton nodded.

'In what capacity?' Thwaite said.

'Not in any capacity,' Fletton said. 'She's staying there.'

'A guest?' Thwaite said.

'If you like,' Fletton said. 'She's living there, anyway.'

'The father raises no objection to that?' Thwaite said.

'He doesn't know,' Fletton said.

'Half a minute, old man,' Thwaite said. 'Doesn't know? How do you mean?'

'He doesn't know where she is,' Fletton said impatiently.

'No one does. Officially, she's run away. The police are looking for her.'

'I say,' Thwaite said. 'My God.'

'What now?' Fletton said.

'You're in a mess, old man,' Thwaite said. 'One hell of a mess. My God. What a mess.'

'What the devil do you mean?' Fletton said. 'I'm in a mess?'

'Sorry,' Thwaite said. 'Slip of the tongue, old boy. I meant, your friend's in a mess, naturally.'

'Did you?' Fletton said. 'Well, I wish you'd get it into your head that my friend's got nothing to do with it.'

'Hasn't he just?' Thwaite said. 'That may be what he thinks, it may be what you think, but old mother Law – Here, listen.' He went to the bookshelf, selected a book, and returned to his desk. 'Where is it?' he said to himself. 'Come on, come on, come on – Ah. Now listen: these are a few of the eventualities in the Law's dirty mind.' He read: 'Offences against the Person Act, 1861, section 55 – Abduction of an unmarried girl under sixteen.' He looked across at Fletton. 'Get that?' he said. 'Abduction.' He went back to his book and read: 'Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885: Procurement – or carnal knowledge – of a girl under sixteen, householder permittin' such on his premises.' He looked up. 'Procurement.' He read again: 'Children and Young Persons Act, 1913, section 2: causing or *encouragin'* seduction of a girl under sixteen –'

Fletton burst out: 'I never heard such bloody nonsense in

my life. The girl was pregnant before she ever came near –'

'The law, old man, the law,' Thwaite said, patting his book. '*Clarke Hall and Morrison on Children*. I know –' He raised a soothing hand. 'Your friend had nothin' to do with it. But it wouldn't be very difficult to tie him up to it, would it – in a number of ways?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'I can see that.' He swallowed. This was a complication he had never even thought of.

'May I ask –' Thwaite said, 'who is the father of the child?'

'I was coming to that,' Fletton said. 'It's a boy in the same village.'

'For God's sake,' Thwaite said. 'Not another minor?'

'He's seventeen,' Fletton said uncomfortably.

'Well,' Thwaite said. 'It's a pretty case, I'll say that. The kind a bench can spread itself on. I can just hear old Goodbrand –'

'Goodbrand?' Fletton said. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'Our senior magistrate,' Thwaite said.

'Oh,' Fletton said. He digested this too, thinking of the episode of the bucket.

'He'd love it,' Thwaite said. 'Besides, Fletton's his district –'

'Who said it was Fletton?' Fletton said.

'Isn't it?' Thwaite said. 'Sorry – again. I assumed it was –'

'Why?' Fletton said.

'Well,' Thwaite said. 'No offence, of course – but it's a bit of a hole, isn't it?'

'Nothing of the kind,' Fletton said. 'I've not been there very long, but it's a decent enough village as far as I can see. And these two kids, they're decent too – you can grin, but I know them, and they're as nice a couple as you'd find anywhere. They've done something silly because they don't know any better, and I'll be damned if I stand by and see them treated like criminals because of it.'

'They won't be treated like criminals,' Thwaite said.

'They'd be dealt with in the Children's Court – care and protection, and all that. It's – er – your friend I'm worried about. He's more than likely to get it where the chicken got the chopper.'

Fletton looked him in the eye. 'What should he do?' he said.

'Give her up to the police,' Thwaite said promptly. 'Tell the whole story, and take his medicine like a man.'

'Oh,' Fletton said.

Thwaite leaned forward. 'That's my official advice,' he said. 'Actually' – he lowered one eyelid, slowly – 'what I'd do myself in his place (which God forbid) would be to buy off the girl's father.' He sat back and let his eye open again.

'Money?' Fletton said.

'Money, promises, threats, flattery,' Thwaite said. 'Makes no odds.'

'You don't know the father,' Fletton said.

'No,' Thwaite said. 'I haven't that pleasure.'

'Money's the only thing,' Fletton said. 'And my friend's got no money. Not enough, anyway.'

'Well,' Thwaite said. 'He'll have to try the other things, won't he?'

Fletton shook his head. 'Won't work,' he said.

'They've got to,' Thwaite said. 'If the girl goes back to her father, and he agrees not to prosecute – bob's your uncle. Or if he could be persuaded just to sue the boy's parents –'

'No,' Fletton said heavily. 'I won't have it.'

Thwaite shrugged. 'It's up to you,' he said, 'and your friend, of course. How does he stand with the local police? If he's an old resident, and well in with them –'

Fletton shook his head.

'He isn't?' Thwaite said.

'No,' Fletton said.

'Well, Goodbrand?' Thwaite said. 'Does he know Goodbrand?'

'He's met him,' Fletton said.

'Like that, is it?' Thwaite said. 'Awkward kind of blighter, isn't he? – your friend, I mean. Likes his trouble up to the neck, eh?'

'Maybe,' Fletton said.

'Well, I'll tell you this,' Thwaite said. 'Get some blunderin' country bobby mixed up in it, and there's no tellin' where it might end. My advice is: get it settled amicably before the police find the girl for themselves.' He opened his book again. 'They've got a lot of powers under the 1913 Act,' he said. 'A hell of a lot. If the father liked to swear information for 'em, for instance, they could get a warrant, and enter by force to search. And here's another interestin' bit: "Any person havin' actual possession or control of a child or young person shall be presumed to have the care of him." That's not healthy – for your friend. And bear this in mind: the worst the girl can get is to be pronounced "in need of care or protection" and sent to "a place of safety." The worst the boy'd get, I imagine, 'ud be an affiliation order and probation. But your friend: I just don't know. A lot of juicy publicity, to say the least. Tell him – from me – to get out from under.'

'Thanks,' Fletton said. He stood up. 'He'll have to think about it a bit. Anyway, thanks again.'

'Not a bit,' Thwaite said. He rose too, and held out his hand. 'Call on me again – any time you like.' They shook hands. 'And sometime we must have a little talk about the estate – when you've less on your mind.'

Fletton glanced at him suspiciously, but his face was bland and open. 'Yes, some other time,' he said.

He went out. Thwaite said slowly under his breath, grinning: 'You – dirty – dog.'

Fletton and Ted came together in the Square. Ted waved and came galloping across like a colt. He had a brown-paper carrier-bag under his arm.

''lo, Captain,' he said. 'You've been out.'

Fletton looked at him grimly and said nothing, which

was so like his ordinary manner that Ted got no inkling of trouble. They walked on side by side.

'She's all reight,' Ted said.

Fletton paused fractionally in his stride; then realizing that it was Mrs Sloan the boy was talking about, walked on. 'Is she?' he said. 'That's good.'

'Aye,' Ted said. 'Broke a little bone in her ankle, doctor said. So she's got it in plaster. She can walk a bit, but she's not to come out. We got back for dinner.'

'That's good,' Fletton said. 'I'm glad to hear it.'

They entered the drive.

'I picked up a couple of rabbits,' Ted said. 'Got one here.' He patted the carrier-bag with his free hand. 'An' a bit of butter. Oh, and while I was in Corby I dropped in on a chap I know as lives there. He was a corporal in t'war, in R.E.M.E. I was asking him about t'owd generator, and far as I can tell there's nowt wrong wi' it.'

'You're a clever lad, aren't you?' Fletton said.

Something in his tone grated on Ted's ear. His self-satisfaction fell away. 'Oh, I don't know,' he said doubtfully. 'You're t'first as ever said so, Captain.'

'Am I?' Fletton said. 'You surprise me.'

Ted swallowed. 'Is - is summat wrong?' he said.

'Wrong?' Fletton said. 'No. How could anything be wrong? Everything's fine.' They reached the bridge. Fletton took the boy by the arm and swung him round. 'For two pins,' he said forcibly, 'I'd wring your neck and chuck you over. Do you know that? It's as much as I can do to keep my hands off you. And you have the damned impudence to ask is anything wrong.'

'It's Sue,' Ted said, very low. 'You've found out about Sue.'

'I've found out about Sue,' Fletton jeered. 'And what the hell did you expect? Would you mind telling me, as a favour, what exactly you *did* expect? What you had in mind?'

'I thought -' Ted began miserably.

'You thought,' Fletton said. 'You never thought in your life. All you're fit for is getting a kid like Sue into trouble and then trying to sneak out of it.'

'I never tried -' Ted said.

'Shut up,' Fletton said. 'Do you know what kind of a jam you've got us all into? You've probably got Sue into a home and yourself into quod - and me with you. You've given Gribble the chance to take your mother to court. Do you realize that: that she's responsible for you? And note that I'm not simply being moral. I'm not preaching. I'm just pointing out that everything you do has consequences - and not only for you, for other people. You happen to be a fool. That's not your fault. But you're a coward too. Because you're a fool you get yourself and that kid in there into trouble, and then you haven't the guts to stand up and admit it. You haven't even got the guts to give your friends a chance to help you - all you can do is run round the nearest corner and hide -'

He stopped abruptly, realizing what he was saying. Ted found difficulty in speaking; his lower lip trembled. He cleared his throat. 'Who should I go to?' he said, croaking. 'I'll tell anyone you like -'

'You keep your mouth shut,' Fletton said, almost absently. 'Till I've had a chance to think this out. It's too late to go blabbing about now.' His thoughts came back to Ted. 'And keep out of my sight, see?' he said with narrowed eyes.

'Yes, Captain,' Ted said.

It began to snow during the night. Fletton lay awake, thinking in circles, for a long time. He knew what was to be done: the whole affair had to be publicized: and as soon as possible. All he wanted was to do it in the way least harmful to Sue, Mrs Sloan, and Ted, in that order. He would quite willingly have taken blame that was not his, if that would have helped; but not only could he see no possibility of that: in fact, what was likely to happen was the exact

reverse. Everything you do has consequences, not only for you, for other people, he had said to Ted: everyone he might have gone to, everyone whose good offices could have been of any help he had insulted and kicked out of the place. The very fact of his interest in the matter would harm anyone unfortunate enough to get his backing.

He got up about two and had a cigarette. Standing at the window, smoking, he watched the snow falling, dimly, outside; odd flakes adhering to the panes and vanishing. He went back to his bed cold, and stayed cold. A wind rose towards dawn, and whistled mournfully through the tiles of the roof. In the morning he was up early; the window was almost blind with snow, and snow had blown in on the wind and lay in a shallow ridge across floor and bed.

He went down to the yard, filled a bucket at the pump, and washed in the coach-house in water that was so cold it burnt the skin. He cooked his breakfast, and ate it in the forge by the fire. He jointed Ted's rabbit and put it on the fire, in a pan, to simmer. When he came out the wind was stronger than ever, the snow whirling down in fine sharp particles that clung to eyebrows and eyelashes. There were new tracks, rapidly filling up, leading into the stables. He called: 'Is that you, Ted?' Ted showed himself at the door. He did not speak.

'You'd better give me a hand to get some more logs up,' Fletton said. 'If this is going to last I shall have to sleep in the house.'

'It'll last,' Ted said. 'It's set in.'

'Have you seen Sue?' Fletton said. 'Is she all right?'

'Aye, I've seen her,' Ted said. 'She's O.K.'

'Come on then,' Fletton said.

They worked all the morning without another word, but with a constraint between them. By one they had a solid pile of logs stacked outside the door of the kitchen, the result of innumerable journeys up and down the great garden stair. Both were exhausted, and wet, and cold. The snow was a foot deep in the yard and coming down just as fast.

'I'll look at the dinner,' Fletton said. 'See if you can get a fire going.' He thickened the stew, standing over the forge and thawing and feeling tired the warmer he grew. He put the cutlery, salt and pepper castors and some bread in his pockets; wrapped the pan in a sack and, carrying it and three plates, returned to the kitchen. There was a great fire roaring in the range, Ted squatting on his haunches in front of it. He looked up as Fletton came in, then away again. Fletton said nothing. He arranged the dinner things on the table and put out three plates of stew, each with a wedge of bread. 'Here,' he said to Ted, 'take this up to Sue.' Ted took it and went out up the back stairs. Fletton had eaten his own dinner and dozed off at the table before he came back. It was the sound of the boy's knife and fork that roused him.

He shook his head and said sleepily: 'You've been a long time'; and, looking at his plate: 'That's cold.'

'It's all right,' Ted said without raising his eyes. 'I stayed with her a bit – for company, like.'

'Did she eat her dinner?' Fletton said.

'Aye,' Ted said. 'Most of it.' He ate on, and when he had finished took the plates and went out into the yard, letting in a blast of cold air. The kitchen was warm; Fletton shivered and hitched his chair nearer to the fire. He was not used to fires; it made him drowsier than ever. He fell asleep again, lolling awkwardly and uncomfortably sideways. It was dark when he woke next, and the fire had burnt low. Ted had him by the arm.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'What's wrong?'

'It's Sue,' Ted said whimperingly.

'What about Sue?' he said. He felt half dead.

'I'm scared,' Ted said. 'She's – she's got pains.'

'Pains?' he said. 'What pains? What the hell do you mean – pains?'

'In her back,' Ted said, '– and her stomach. She keeps moaning, like.'

'My God,' Fletton said. It sank in at last. 'Let's see her.'

He was off through the dark house, up the stairs, three at a time, Ted behind him. 'How long's this been going on?' he jerked out over his shoulder.

'She had 'em – dinner-time,' Ted panted. 'Wouldn't – let me – say owt.'

'You bloody young fool,' Fletton said between his teeth.

Sue was sitting quietly on her bed. Her eyes looked enormous in the glow of the stove. The force of the wind seemed to make the whole room shudder; the window rattled continuously.

Fletton pulled up sharp at the door. 'Well,' he said. 'What's all this?'

She smiled shadowily. 'It's nowt,' she said. 'A bit o' back-ache. Caught a bit of cold, I shouldn't wonder.'

'When?' Fletton said.

'She knew what he meant. 'Came on this morning,' she said. 'Just before t'clock struck six.'

'And you've had it all day?' he said.

'On and off,' she said. 'It's nowt. I'll be all right.'

'Now look,' he said. 'We don't want any heroines here.' She smiled again. 'You know jolly well what it's likely to be. Tell me honestly. Cross your heart.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Might be.'

He saw her face and then her body stiffen. She sat rigid, as though listening to her own breath which he could hear, short and sharp, above the wind. She grunted, as though someone had kicked her; and after a long time, relaxed.

'That was – it?' he said. She nodded. 'I'm not risking anything,' he said. 'I'm going for a doctor.'

'No, don't,' she said. 'You mustn't –'

'You be a good girl,' he said. 'And don't worry. I won't be long.'

He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter past five. He turned and launched himself down the stairs, Ted following again. On the landing he stopped, and Ted cannoned into him. 'Go back,' he said. 'Stay with her – No. Come on down.'

'Now listen,' he said, buckling the belt of his coat in the kitchen. 'Make up the fire. Get all the water hot you can – boil it and put it in the ovens or something. Make her a cup of tea – can't do her any harm.' A vague memory came to him. 'Make her walk up and down instead of sitting still. And don't leave her for long – don't let her have those pains alone.' He took hold of the boy's shoulders. 'And don't let her see *you're* scared. Understand?'

Ted nodded; then swallowed. 'Captain,' he said.

Fletton paused at the door.

'There's no doctor nearer than Stewbury,' Ted said. 'Matthews, that did my ma.'

'Oh,' Fletton said. He fingered his chin. 'Never mind,' he said. 'I'll phone him and bring someone else meantime – I know: the District Nurse.'

'District Nurse lives in Dakerford,' Ted said.

'Can't argue now,' Fletton said. 'I'll find someone. Don't forget what I told you.'

He ran along the hall and opened the front door. The wind snatched it out of his hand and flung it inwards with a crash. He pulled his cap down over his eyes and butted through the wind out on to the portico. The wind took him by the throat, by the ears, by the arms and legs, and tried to smash him down. He slithered the depth of the stairs, into deep snow; picked himself up, and staggered outwards, hustled and buffeted and battered by wind and snow. He fetched up breathless against the balustrade and turned left. On the open terrace the snow was not lying, the wind was too strong; but as soon as the drive began to curve away downwards out of the wind it thickened, so that he exchanged one difficulty for another. The going varied with the pitch of the drive; where it lay at right-angles to the wind, in the lee of the bushes it was comparatively clear; but where it turned into the wind's line the snow was knee-high and over – like the weeds on his first arrival, he remembered with a grin. He caught the grin on his face, and thought: very funny, oh, very funny. You'd better concentrate, old

boy. On who you're going to get – and what you're going to say to 'em when you get 'em. This is no time for little jokes. No time for little jokes, no time for little jokes, one side of his mind kept on repeating; while another asked grimly, desperately: who, who, who? And at the same time he debated: get someone, then phone; phone, then get someone?

At the gates, breathing in great gasps, he stopped for a moment, and plunged out again into the full force of the blizzard. He had reached no decision; he shouldered his way forward, head down, making automatically for the telephone outside the post office. The Square was deserted, snow-filled as if with whirling dervishes. He came to the box and had to kick away the drift before the door to open it. Inside, insulated from the storm in a rectangular pillar of calm, he leaned forward resting his two hands on the coin-box with its knobs marked A and B, chin on chest, mouth open, eyes closed, gulping air into his lungs. Then he passed a hand over his face and opened his eyes. Come on, he said to himself, no time to hang about. He fumbled with the pages of the directory. M – MA – MAT – Matthews, physn & srgn, Stewbury 26. He lifted the receiver and dialed o. And waited. There was no sound. He agitated the receiver hook and tried again. He tried TRU, TOL, DIR, and 999. There was no sound. The line was dead.

He turned about and stood leaning against the instrument. He could feel the wind, outside, springing at the box like a tiger at the bars of its cage. Now he had to decide: who? And it came to him. The woman – Mrs Walsh. Betty Walsh. A good sort – and a woman like that was bound to know what to do.

The wind and the snow came down the Dakerford road like an avalanche. The wind ranted and howled, and the snow bit into his eyes and filled his nostrils. Once past The Harvesters, he hugged the fronts of the cottages on the north side of the road, feeling blindly with his left hand along

their faces – door, short wall, window, long wall, window, short wall, door – repeated and repeated. Then his hand met emptiness and he was stumbling down the lane. Here, behind the fence, he could breathe and stand upright; and in the open space between the first and second rows of cottages it was almost calm, though the wind still shouted overhead and the snow fell perpendicularly.

He knocked at the wrong house first. A woman opened it. 'Two doors down,' she said, with a sour and disapproving look. He went on, two doors, and knocked again. This time it was Betty Walsh.

'That's me,' she said. 'Who're you?'

She held the door wider for the light to fall on him.

'Well, look who's here,' she said with a crow of laughter. 'I thought it was Santa Claus. Come on in, ducks.'

She leaned out, took hold of his arm, and pulled him inside. He stood blinking in the light; the room was stiflingly hot and reeked of scent and spirits; the powdery snow on his eyebrows and eyelashes began to melt into his eyes. He passed his hand over his face and said breathlessly: 'I'm sorry. I didn't think –'

The sofa was pulled across in front of the fire; a man sitting on it was gazing at him with owlsh solemnity.

'That's all right,' the woman said. 'Friend of mine – Mr Beasley.' The man touched the cowlick into which his hair was smoothed across his brow. 'Tommy, say how-do to –' She looked at Fletton and shut one eye with terrific elaboration – 'nother friend of mine.'

'How do,' the man said obediently.

'How do you do,' Fletton said. He realized with a feeling of sickness that they were both drunk.

'That's right,' the woman said. 'Have a drink, ducks?'

'No, thanks,' Fletton said.

'No, thanks,' she mimicked. She put her hands on her hips. 'Aren't my friends –?'

'Of course,' Fletton said. 'It's just –'

'C'mon then,' she said. 'Have a drink. Just a little one –'

'No,' Fletton said.

'Not so particular last time,' she said, slurring the words together. 'My front step -', she said to the man: 'Poo - y'ought to have seen it.'

'I can't,' Fletton said. 'I've got some trouble - it's all right,' he said. 'I'm sorry to have barged in. I'll go '

'What trouble?' she said.

'It's nothing,' he said, his hand on the door-knob.

'What's trouble?' she said. 'Nobody's never come to Betty Walsh in trouble, and not got a helping hand. Never. Cos it's like I always say, you never know when it may be you. So what I always say -'

'Thanks, anyway,' Fletton said 'Good night.'

Outside, he leaned against the door and thought desperately. Who? Where now?

He began to walk, head down against the snow, because it was no good standing there. Mrs Sloan? he thought. No good - even if she would have come, she can't The policeman? Hopeless. George Ames? Mrs Ames? He turned into the open road and the wind placed a hand in his back and shoved him forward at a half-run, tripping and stumbling. He made for the Fletton Arms because it was the only place left, because they might be able to suggest something. When he reached it the door was locked, the bar dark. He rattled the knob, and banged and kicked on the door; and at last saw light appear, dimly, through the frosted glass. He banged harder. The door opened.

'What the hell?' George Ames said. 'Why - Captain. Come in, sir: I can't hold the door.'

He went in, and helped Ames close the door in the wind's teeth.

'What can -?' Ames began, and then in a different tone, 'Something wrong, Captain?'

He nodded, gasping.

'Here, sit down,' Ames said. He dragged a stool forward. 'What is it?'

'I'm in trouble,' he said. 'I've got someone – a girl – never mind who – up at the Hall. She's – having a baby.'

'Having what?' Ames said.

'A baby,' he said. 'A baby, man – a child. She's in labour.'

'Good God,' Ames said. 'But –'

'There's no one there but me and young Ted Sloan,' Fletton said rapidly. 'I've got to get someone quick – a woman. I've tried the phone, but the line's dead –'

'They're all down,' Ames said.

Fletton nodded. 'So I've got to find someone, quick.'

Ames looked at him. 'If you mean the missus,' he said. 'It's no go. She's not strong – she couldn't make it –'

'No, no,' Fletton said. 'But you know everybody – who can I go to?'

'Well,' Ames said. He scratched his head.

'Hurry, man, hurry,' Fletton said. 'God only knows what's happening up there, now.'

'There's – Miss Harriet,' Ames said.

'Miss –?' Fletton said. 'Oh no.'

'That's where I'd go, if it was me,' Ames said. 'Everyone goes to Miss Harriet – you know, for first aid and such.'

'She's only a girl,' Fletton said. 'This is a woman's job.'

'Girl or not,' Ames said, 'she's the one. No women in this place 'ud touch me – not living. Miss Harriet knows what to do.'

'But –' Fletton said.

'She's the one,' Ames said.

'All right,' Fletton said. 'I can't argue.'

'You won't do better,' Ames said. Fletton got to his feet, wearily. 'Captain,' Ames said. 'A drop of something – before you go.'

'No,' Fletton said. He grinned suddenly. 'Never touch the stuff. And thanks, George. For the advice – and everything.'

'That's all right,' Ames said. He was embarrassed. 'You don't have to thank me for anything, Captain. And I wish

I could have helped.' His voice came after Fletton, above the wind: 'I hope everything's all right.'

It was the Rector who opened the door, peering out from behind it. 'Who is it?' he said uncertainly.

'Me,' Fletton said. 'Fletton.'

'Godfrey,' the Rector said. 'Come in, my dear boy.' Fletton went into the hall and stood uncomfortably. 'What a night,' the Rector said. '*What* a night – let me take your things.'

'Thank you,' Fletton said. 'No. I can't stay.' He felt worse than a fool, though there was nothing in the Rector's manner to show he remembered their last meeting: nothing at all but the warmest welcome. 'I hate having to do this,' he said. 'But – well, it was Miss Barnes, really –'

'Harry?' the Rector said, without surprise. 'Of course. But do come in by the fire –'

'No,' Fletton said. 'I can't. I'm in the most frightful hurry. If you could –'

'Of course,' the Rector said again. He stood at the foot of the stairs and called: 'Harry, Harry. Here's Godfrey wanting you.'

'What?' her voice came back. 'Who is it?'

She came into sight above.

'Godfrey,' her father said. 'Godfrey Fletton.'

She paused momentarily and then came on. 'Wanting me?' she said.

'Yes,' Fletton said. 'It's – I went to George Ames and he said you were the only one –'

'What is it?' she said. 'Is something wrong?'

He nodded. 'I've got to have help,' he said. 'Not for me – I wouldn't ask for myself –'

'Oh, go on,' she said impatiently. 'We know all that.'

'I've tried everything,' he said. 'The telephone's down – I can't get a doctor –'

'An accident?' she said. She sat down on the stairs, slip-

ped off her shoes, and began to put on a pair of Wellingtons standing by the rail.

'No,' he said. 'A – a baby.'

She stopped for a moment and looked at him. 'A sick baby?' she said.

'No,' he said 'A new one – being born.'

'Good Lord,' she said. She stood up and crossed to the hall-stand 'I didn't know anyone – who is it?'

'Sue Gribble,' he said.

'Sue –' She stopped, and faced him. 'Is this a joke?' she said. 'Because if it is –'

'Of course it's not a joke,' he said. 'Do you think I'd come here and drag you out – Can you do anything, anyway?'

She buttoned her coat 'I can try,' she said calmly. 'Where is she?'

'Up at the Hall,' he said.

'Oh,' she said. 'I see.' She wound a scarf round her head. 'What have you got?'

He looked blank.

'Hot water?' she said. 'Bandages, cotton wool, scissors, Dettol –?'

'Only hot water,' he said

'Right,' she said. 'Just a minute.' She vanished into the back part of the house leaving him with the Rector. They looked at each other.

'I'm sorry,' Fletton began.

'Don't,' the Rector said. 'It's all right. That poor child. You did quite right coming here Ames was quite right. Harry's very good –'

She came back with a small attaché case.

'Well, dad,' she said. 'I'll be seeing you – sometime. Come on,' she said to Fletton. 'How far has she got with it?'

'It started about six,' she said.

'To-night?' she said.

'No,' he said 'This morning.'

She whistled. 'My hat,' she said. 'And it's half-past now. We'll have to –'

She opened the door; the storm took the rest of her words and tore them away. They fought the wind across the Square, side by side. In the drive they came into the deep snow; at first he went ahead, treading it down; after a few minutes he held out his hand, behind him; she took it and he pulled her after him. Halfway up a tree had fallen; they were on it before they knew, snared in its stupid branches; it was necessary to back out and detour through snow that was even thicker. As the drive ascended the wind became fiercer; it howled and roared at them, deafened and blinded them, beat the breath out of their bodies and sentience from their minds, so that all that remained was the consciousness of effort, the savage satisfaction of placing one foot before the other, and the other, and the other. They fought the wind across the terrace, leaning forward into it as if on a precipitous slope; won the shelter of the steps; and into the hall. They leaned against the wall, heads back, gasping. At last she said:

'You nearly pulled my hand off.' She flexed the fingers of the hand he had held, painfully.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'It's all right,' she said.

Ted came down the stairs, carrying a candle whose flame he shielded with his free hand. It shone back on his face; he looked terrified.

'How is she?' Fletton said. 'Has anything happened?'

Ted moistened his lips, 'She's bad,' he said. 'She's lying down a minute.'

'Where's your fire?' Harriet broke in. 'I must get warm. There's no feeling in my fingers.'

'In here,' Fletton said. He led the way into the kitchen. The fire roared majestically up the chimney; the big kettle on the hob was boiling, spitting out steam. Harriet stripped off her coat and went to the fire. She stood over it, holding her hands to the warmth, rubbing them together.

'How often are the pains coming?' she said over her shoulder, to Ted.

'All t'time, pretty well,' he said. '- I think.'

'Is she crying out?' Harriet said.

He shook his head. 'Never said a word,' he said. 'Not since you went, Captain.' He swallowed hard. 'Is she going to die?' he mumbled.

'Die?' Harriet said. 'What on earth are you talking about? Is this all the hot water you've got?'

'There's two buckets in t'oven,' Ted said.

'Come on then,' she said. 'Bring one of them.' She picked up her attaché case. 'Which way?'

Fletton led the way again: himself with the candle, Harriet, and Ted carrying the pail of hot water; their shadows following, pushing up close at the corners as if to hear anything that was said, dropping back in disappointment and sidling quietly along the corridor walls behind them.

Sue was sitting up and leaning slightly forward. She looked up at them without moving but with the ghost of a smile.

'Hallo there,' Fletton said. 'Now look who I've brought you. Someone who knows all about this little do of yours -'

'Hallo, Sue,' Harriet said.

'Miss Barnes,' Sue said, in a whisper. 'You shouldn't have come. It's not fit -' Her face contracted; she stopped speaking. Harriet dropped to her knees beside her and took her hands.

'Hold on to me,' she said. 'You're all right: don't be scared. Sue, listen: this is *it* - this that's happening now. It's not just getting ready for it: this is your baby fighting to be born. You can shout out if you like, but it's better if you don't. It helps if you fight back the way you are - that's it. Fight. Fight.'

Sue relaxed a little. She said in the same whisper: 'I'll fight, Miss Barnes.'

'You're brave,' Harriet said. She looked up and saw Fletton and Ted. 'You two get outside. Do you want to make her more uncomfortable than she is? Wait outside

the door.' They moved out sheepishly as she said: 'Now, Sue love, lie down and let's see –'

They stood by the wall, side by side, listening to the murmur of her voice and the freakish violence of the wind among the chimney stacks.

Harriet called: 'Aren't there any more candles?'

'Candles,' Fletton said.

'I'll get 'em,' Ted said. He shot away down the stairs. He came back with three more candles which he passed into the room, resuming his position alongside Fletton.

After a time he said in a low voice: 'Captain.'

'What is it?' Fletton said.

'Is it always – like this?' he said.

'Pretty much, I expect,' Fletton said. 'Or worse. They've not all got the guts Sue has.'

Ted swallowed. Fletton put his arm about his shoulders.

Sue screamed, one short hoarse cry. Harriet called urgently: 'Godfrey.'

'What's wrong?' he said.

'Just a minute,' she said.

He stood looking down at her back helplessly. Sue was breathing in a series of rapid grunting expirations. He could see her feet, but her head was in shadow by the wall.

'Here,' Harriet said. 'Take it.' He bent over her. 'Kneel down,' she said irritably. 'Beside me. Here. And *don't* pull away.' She placed something soft and warm, and slippery, in his hands. It moved, and emitted a thin cry. His heart turned over. He held himself rigid, motionless. Harriet worked swiftly.

'I'm all thumbs,' she said as if to herself. 'Scissors. Scissors. Ah. That's it.'

She sat back, and sighed, then turned. 'Give it to me,' she said. She took off her cardigan and wrapped the baby in it. Fletton felt deathly sick.

Chapter Twelve

*

'It is Ted's, isn't it?' Harriet said. She leaned forward to the fire, stretching out her hands, letting the heat draw the ache and the tiredness out of them.

'They both say so,' Fletton said. He poured tea from the vast teapot into his two cups. 'Here,' he said. 'Have this. It'll help.' He sat down opposite her, on the other side of the hearth. 'You – you must feel pretty proud,' he said.

'I don't,' she said. 'Not a bit. Just tired.'

'You should be proud too,' he said. 'By God, if I could –' He stopped, shaking his head.

'Sue's the one to be proud,' she said

'She's got guts,' he said. 'But she'd no choice, once it started –'

'Had I?' she said

'Well, no,' he said. 'I suppose you hadn't, really. But what a bit of luck, for us – you knowing about babies.'

She smiled. 'I don't,' she said. 'Or – I didn't.'

'You mean –?' he said.

'Well, I knew the theory, of course,' she said.

'You mean this was the first time –?' he said.

She nodded.

'My God,' he said. He was silent. 'And you still say you'd no choice?' he burst out.

'I hadn't, had I?' she said. 'You came and asked me. What would you and Sue have done if I'd said no thanks, not me?'

'I'd have tried somewhere else, of course,' he said. 'After all, I'd only Ames' word – I didn't really expect –'

'But you wouldn't have sat down and said, well, that's that; I tried?' she said.

'Naturally not,' he said.

'Why naturally?' she said.

'Well,' he said. 'Damn it, how could I? The kid was in trouble, bad trouble; she was in my house –'

'Exactly,' she said. 'And you were in trouble, and you were in my house –'

'Oh, nonsense,' he said. 'It's not the same thing at all –'

She opened her mouth to speak, and closed it again. Then she said: 'Could I have another cup of tea, please?'

He held out his hand for her cup, and got up.

'I don't know whether you know,' she said to his back, 'just how irritating you are.'

'Me?' he said. He gave her her tea.

'Yes, you,' she said. 'Look at what you've just said. When you do something decent, *naturally* you couldn't do anything else. With other people, it's different –'

'But I didn't mean that at all,' he said. 'You're just twisting words –'

'All right,' she said. 'I apologize. I'm sorry I twisted your words.' She paused. 'But you *do* irritate me, all the same.'

'I know I do,' he said. 'What I can't make out is why.'

'Because you're never what I expect you to be,' she said. 'You never do what I expect you to do.'

'I know that too,' he said. 'But it's hardly my fault, is it?'

'No,' she said. 'And that's irritating, too.'

'Full circle,' he said. 'What do we do now – start again?' She laughed, a pleasant quiet sound.

'I've never heard you laugh before,' he said.

'Haven't you?' she said. 'I do, sometimes. I wonder –' She looked at him seriously. 'You're different again, tonight,' she said. 'Not like you were at all. I think that's why I was twisting what you said. I wanted you to be like you were, because I wanted to go on being irritated in the same way.'

'But why?' he said.

She shrugged her shoulders, very slightly. 'You said it,' she said, 'that night you came to tea. I denied it, but it was true. You weren't the real Godfrey – just some stupid outsider butting in. And what made it worse, you *looked* like

David. I used to be in love with David – when I was about ten –’ She stopped, looking into the fire.

Fletton said nothing; he watched her intently.

‘David was all charm,’ she said at last, out of her thoughts. ‘At least, he was then. I don’t know what the war did to him – I hadn’t seen him for years. When I met Godfrey – that was in Cairo – David had just been killed at Alamein. We talked about him. We were in a kind of solemn dedicatory mood: I suppose everyone was about that time, weren’t they?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fletton said. ‘I wasn’t.’

She gave him a rapid glance, and went on as if he had not spoken. ‘We were going to make Fletton a kind of monument to David – clean it up and polish it. Then Godfrey went as well. Everyone went on fighting, and somehow the – the glow seemed to die out of it all, and it was just a nasty sordid free-for-all, and peace happened, and I came back to Fletton and found the bright and shining monument was just as nasty and sordid as it ever was. More. Then you arrived’

‘I – see what you mean,’ Fletton said.

‘I don’t suppose you do,’ she said. ‘It was – just as though David and Godfrey had got soiled and dirtied too – I’m sorry.’ she broke off. ‘I don’t really mean that –’

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘But they might have done, you know.’

‘I know that,’ she said. ‘I knew it then, I think – but that didn’t make it any better at all. You were – drunk – or I thought you were –’

‘I wasn’t,’ he said.

‘You said so,’ she said. ‘But I didn’t choose to believe it – and what happened with Mrs Winnington-Jones didn’t alter my opinion,’ she added severely.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ he said, but she waved him aside.

‘Then the next morning,’ she went on, ‘before I’d really seriously connected you with the Hall, I had to run away. You chased me away from the place where I’d had my very

happiest times – and in circumstances that made me feel rather silly, I might say.'

They smiled at each other.

'So when you came to tea,' she said. 'I gave it to you for all I was worth. I was out to make you sit up –'

'And you did,' he said.

'I wasn't interested in you when I began,' she said. 'Or even in Fletton. I was getting my own back, for myself, and for David and Godfrey. But the way you came back at me justified it all, and everything you did afterwards made me more certain. I put you down as a boor, and – and –'

'And a fool,' he said. 'And a coward –'

'No,' she said.

'If you didn't you ought to have done,' he said. 'I was in full flight, running like hell. You got in my way.'

'What –?' she began, and broke off.

'What was I running from?' he said. He made a large gesture. 'Everything – myself included. I'll tell you about it – sometime, not now. I wasn't in any state to have my duty pointed out to me, anyway.'

'It was unforgivable,' she said.

'Not a bit,' he said. 'I asked for it. Everything you said – and nearly everything you thought about me was true. Where you were wrong was in what you said about Fletton – the village.'

'Oh no, I won't have that,' she said. 'I can believe my eyes and ears.'

'Can you?' he said. 'I'm inclined to think they're about the last things to believe. You see what you want to see, and you hear what you want to hear. Eyes and ears do as they're told – and don't ask me what tells them, because I'm not going to make myself feel a fool by putting it into words.'

'Do you like my father?' she asked irrelevantly.

'Very much,' he said, surprised.

'That's the kind of thing he might say,' she said. 'Only he'd finish it off without feeling the least bit stupid.'

Fletton nodded. 'I know,' he said.

'I said you were different,' she said. 'But it's more than that – Why is it, Godfrey?'

'I know I'm different,' he said. 'I feel different. I can describe how different I feel. It's only when I start trying to say *why* that I come to a stop.' He smiled. 'I told Sue my tragic life-story the other day – worked myself into a sweat over it too. She thought it was sad, but she also thought it was silly. In fact, I'm not certain that she didn't find it sad because it was so silly. I've thought about it quite a bit, and it seems to me at this moment that we're always silliest at our most tragic – when we're most serious, if you like. Life – My God,' he said. 'Listen to me now – Fletton on Life.'

'No, go on,' she said. 'Please go on.'

'O.K.,' he said. 'Midnight in the deserted grange. No time like it. Well, what I was going to say was this: life *isn't* serious, not really. It's not meant to be the solemn thing we make it into. You worry yourself sick about other people's troubles. Then you get right inside them, and you discover that they themselves aren't feeling a bit the way you think they ought to be. They're – they're having a high old time, on the quiet – enjoying themselves like mad. Or – this is the other side – you worry yourself sick about your own troubles, then you get outside them, and you find the other chap's trying to stop himself bursting out laughing at you. You're funny. It's all a matter of the point of view. Right?'

'Yes,' she said, on a doubtful note.

'That's simplifying it,' he said.

'Is it?' she said.

'Well, isn't it?' he said. 'I thought it was. Of course I'm not much good as a philosopher – haven't had a lot of practice – but I thought I'd got something there. Bring it down to cases and you'll see. Here's Fletton: what did you call it? – a sink. Thwaite – that's my solicitor – called it a hole. George Ames –'

'I know what George Ames thinks,' she said. 'He doesn't hide it.'

'No,' Fletton said. 'But Mrs Ames says – I've forgotten

her exact words – something like its being the people in it that make a place. And she's right. If you think nothing of the people you think nothing of the place. But if you *like* the people, then the place is home. And whether you like the people depends on you, not them. That's the way I've worked it out, anyway: nothing very deep about it; but then I'm not very deep. Do you see?"

'In a bitty kind of way,' she said. 'But does it really hold water? I mean –'

'Look,' he said. 'I'm talking about human beings – natural ordinary people. I'm not talking about – well, about the guards where I was during the war. They weren't human, or natural, or anything else. They were swine. They – I'm getting off the track. I'm talking about Sue, for instance. Or not even for instance. I'm just talking about Sue. She's a sort of miracle. That's all you can call her. This mouldy old house was different from the day she came into it. It – it kind of blossomed. She got under my guard just by being here. She's provoked her Ted, not one of nature's heroes, into marvels of organization and improvisation, within his limits. She's got you up here in the middle of a snowstorm – and do you know what you said a few minutes ago? I noticed it particularly: you said "Sue's the one to be proud." What of? An illegitimate baby? You were pretty down on that kind of goings-on –'

'Oh, now just a minute,' Harriet said. 'You know very well –'

'I know what you meant,' he said. 'You meant exactly what you said, and you meant it because Sue is Sue, and nothing else at all. She's just what she is – natural, simple, and alive. Miracles come easy to Sue. And the biggest miracle of the lot is that she's got you and me together, here, in the middle of the night, me talking half-baked philosophy and you listening to me. If that isn't a miracle, what is?'

She laughed. 'You're a dangerous kind of philosopher,' she said. 'I don't think you're very moral.'

'I'm jolly certain I'm not,' he said cheerfully. 'I've never

pretended to be. But I know decency when I see it – and little Sue's decent, baby or no baby.'

'I say,' Harriet said. 'We keep talking about the baby – I wonder how it is. And how Sue is.'

'They'll be all right,' he said. 'They were asleep, weren't they?'

'That was over an hour ago,' she said. 'I think I'd better go up and look.'

'I'll come with you,' he said.

They went quietly up the back stairs. Above the first floor the wind was master, charging round the house, rattling windows, blowing along the corridor.

'Just listen to that,' Fletton said. 'You'll never get home –'

'Ssh,' she said, listening for another sound. There was none. They tiptoed up the last curving flight, and looked in at the door.

They could not see Sue, nor the baby. Ted was lying beside them, one arm across Sue's body; all three asleep, motionless.

*

In the morning the wind dropped. The snow lay white on a world in which there was no sound at all, nothing stirring. Very early, the Rector went across from the house to the church. The snow in the churchyard, below the bulk of the church, was not thick, only slightly above his ankles, though he had had to break through a thicker crust that lay up against the house door. In the church it was very cold; he knelt before the altar and prayed, his breath making the prayer visible. When he had done, he got up, genuflected, and walked down the centre aisle to the south door, rubbing his hands together. He pulled the door open, and stood looking out into the Square. Opposite, above the trees, he could just see the chimneys of the Hall through a rimy haze. Peering, he decided that he could distinguish a thread of smoke rising from one, straight into the air. He smiled, blew

on his hands, and was about to go in when Constable Helliwell came into the frame of the door, trudging resolutely through snow well over a foot deep.

'Good morning, Helliwell,' the Rector said.

The policeman jumped. He stopped, looked round, saw the Rector, and touched his cap. 'Morning, sir,' he said glumly. 'I didn't see you in there.'

'I was just enjoying the view,' Mr Barnes said. 'The snow makes the village quite beautiful, don't you think?'

'Ah,' Helliwell said. 'It's the shepherds up on the moor I was thinking about. And myself, come to that.'

'Yes, indeed,' the Rector said, distressed. 'You're quite right. Those poor fellows – and the sheep too. And you. I'm sorry, I should have thought before I spoke –'

'That's all right, sir,' Helliwell said. 'It is pretty – but I could do with a lot less of it with four miles of it to walk through.'

'Four miles?' the Rector said. 'Are you –?'

'Just off to Stewbury,' the policeman said. 'All the phones are down, and I've a report to make. Bike's no good, not in this – so here I am. Be there by dinner-time if I'm lucky.'

'Then I mustn't keep you,' Mr Barnes said. 'You must get on. But – yes: I've a bit of news to cheer you on your way.'

'Oh,' Helliwell said. 'And what's that, sir?'

'Our prodigal has returned,' the Rector said. 'Little Sue Gribble.'

'Is that so?' the policeman said. 'Well, that's news all right. I'd better see her. Where is she? At her dad's?'

'No,' the Rector said. 'She's at the Hall. She had a baby there last night – at least, she was about to have a baby, when I last heard.'

'A baby?' the policeman said. 'Whose baby?'

'I don't know,' Mr Barnes said mildly. 'I don't believe the father's name was mentioned. And I didn't think to enquire. Possibly someone she met on her travels.'

'She's not been gone that long,' Helliwell said. He was staring at the snow round his feet. 'Well,' he said abruptly. 'I must be on my way. Good morning, sir.'

He had made up his mind: Sergeant Thomas was the man to handle this. Helliwell whistled a little tune under his breath until he began to grow tired; the half smile on his face persisted even after that.

At half-past eight Harriet set out for home. She was sleepy, but not too sleepy to enjoy the faint sunlight that with the haze made the morning opalescent. She refused Fletton's offer to accompany her. 'I'll be perfectly all right,' she said. 'I'll get school started, and then after lunch I'll be back with Gribble.'

'He's going to be awkward,' Fletton said. 'Do you think -?'

'Oh, he'll come,' she said. 'He may not like it, but you leave him to me. And don't forget: send Ted off to Dimfold for milk, otherwise you may not get any. And I'll try and get word to the doctor.'

'You're very good,' Fletton said.

'Hooey,' she said. 'Put it down to Sue - she's got us both under her spell.'

He watched her go off down the drive. At the turn, just before she vanished, she waved. He waved back, and went into the house, very content.

'That was a pretty good show,' Ken said.

'She was marvellous,' Harriet said. /

'I meant you,' Ken said.

'But it just-happened,' she said. 'In fact, once it started happening, you couldn't stop it, believe me. In a way it was frightening - I don't mean the thing itself, I mean the power of it. It - swept you on. You'd no time to think, you just helped, as well as you could.'

'It was a good show,' Ken said.

'All right,' she said. 'But it was Sue's show. She's -

Godfrey, says she's a sort of miracle, and I can see what he means.'

'Who says?' Ken said.

'Godfrey,' she said. 'Godfrey Fletton.'

'Oh,' Ken said.

'And Ken,' she said. 'He's different. It's quite extraordinary. It's like talking to another man.'

'He's the same man,' Ken said. 'He's found the way out, that's all.'

'Out of what?' she said.

'Out of himself,' he said. 'He was in a closed circuit – now he's out again. I'm glad.'

'Are you?' she said. She looked at him, sitting in his chair with his hands on his knees; and wondered at his capacity to be glad about anything, now. On an impulse, she went over to him and touched his shoulder.

'Kenny,' she said. She had not called him that for years. 'I wish –'

'What?' he said.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said, 'All kinds of things. I wish – I've never said anything, but I wish I could make it up to you, somehow –'

He was touched, and looked for words. The Rector came in.

'By Jove,' he said. 'It's getting colder. There'll be a crackling frost to-night.' He crossed to the fire and bent to warm his hands. 'Helliwell made good time,' he said.

'Helliwell?' Harriet said.

'Yes,' he said. 'He's back already.'

'Has he been away?' she said.

'Didn't I tell you?' he said. 'He went off to Stewbury first thing this morning – walking. He and that very pleasant sergeant of his have just gone up to the Hall in a car –'

'Good Lord,' Harriet said. 'You didn't tell him – about Sue?'

'Of course,' the Rector said. 'Why not? It looked rather

funny,' he said. 'Two English bobbies sitting in a jeep. I didn't know the police force -'

'I'm going over to see Gribble,' Harriet said at the door. 'I don't know when I'll be back -'

'Good luck, Harry,' Ken said. 'And you do, you know.'

'Do what?' she called from the hall.

'Make it up,' he said. 'In all kinds of ways.'

The front door banged

The church clock had just struck one, and the sweet note was still hanging on the air, when Helliwell and the sergeant climbed the steps under the portico. They had left their borrowed jeep where the fallen tree lay across the drive, and were both rather breathless, and sprinkled with snow. The sergeant pounded on the door.

Fletton, in the kitchen, thought: Ted. And about time too. Why can't the young fool come round? He had finally found an interest in Ted's generator, and had spent the morning running a lead into the house, using the coil of U.S. army wire which Ted had provided. Now he wiped his hands on a piece of rag, and went through the scullery into the passage-way and along the hall.

'Couldn't you have come round -' he said as he opened the door. He saw the two policemen and said: 'Oh. It's you.' He was taken aback. He had expected them eventually but not so soon. He had intended to be ready for them when they came, but so far had not given them a thought.

'Good morning, Sir Godfrey,' the sergeant said formally. 'I have reason to believe that the girl, Sue Gribble -'

'All right, all right,' Fletton said. 'She's here. Come in: it's warmer.' He held the door open. The two policemen stepped inside.

As Fletton closed the door, the sergeant said, with a note of embarrassment in spite of himself: 'I understand further that she has - or is about to have -'

'I wish you'd stop talking like an exercise book, sergeant,' Fletton said. He led the way through the house. 'She's had a

baby. Last night. A fine boy – about six and a half pounds, by my estimate.'

They entered the kitchen.

'And she's still here?' the sergeant said. He glanced round.

'Of course she's here,' Fletton said. 'Sit down, won't you?'

'No, thank you, sir,' the sergeant said.

'Well, I will,' Fletton said. 'It was rather a tiring night.' He sat down by the fire. The sergeant and Helliwell stood, solidly, blue and slightly menacing above him.

'When did she come back?' the sergeant said. 'And why, please, didn't you –?'

Fletton took a breath. 'She didn't come back,' he said as casually as he could.

'She didn't?' the sergeant said. 'But you've already admitted –'

'Admitted,' Fletton said, 'is not the right word. I'm not making admissions, sergeant. I'm telling you.'

'Very well,' the sergeant said. 'When you say she didn't come back you mean –'

'I mean she's been here all the time,' Fletton said.

'Thank you,' the sergeant said. He looked at Helliwell, briefly. 'That's something.'

'I should explain –' Fletton began.

'I think you'll have to, sir,' the sergeant said. He was beginning to feel a certain mastery of the situation.

'Look, sergeant,' Fletton said. 'I don't like your manner. I had occasion to tell you so before –'

'I remember,' the sergeant said. 'You told me at the same time that the girl wasn't here. Now you say she is here. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me –'

'If you keep your mouth shut for two minutes,' Fletton said with rising temper, 'I'll tell you the whole thing. I'm trying to tell you the whole thing –'

'There's no need to lose your temper, sir,' the sergeant said, smugly. 'It won't do you any good.'

Fletton swallowed. 'Listen,' he said. 'The last time, when

I told you she wasn't here, I didn't know she was here. She had – come into the house without my knowledge.'

The sergeant smiled fleetingly.

'I was living in the stables,' Fletton said. 'I never went into the upper rooms. There was no reason why I should know. In fact, as I've already said, I didn't know.'

'But you found out later,' the sergeant said.

'I found out later,' Fletton said.

'And of course,' the sergeant said, 'you immediately informed the girl's father?'

'No,' Fletton said. 'Why should I? If she wanted to run away from that brute

'You were aware,' the sergeant said, 'that the girl is a minor?'

'I didn't think about it,' Fletton said. 'I wasn't particularly interested.'

'The law is,' the sergeant said

'I'm not a lawyer,' Fletton said 'And I don't ask every female I meet how old she is.'

'No,' the sergeant said. 'Very well When did you – get to know the girl was pregnant?'

'Well,' Fletton said. 'Let's see It was – yes, last Monday.'

'You don't understand me,' the sergeant said patiently. 'I said, when –?'

'And I heard you,' Fletton said. 'I said. last Monday.'

The sergeant looked at Helliwell again, then back to Fletton. 'Now look,' he said. 'You don't really expect me to believe –'

'I don't expect you to believe anything,' Fletton said. 'And to be honest I don't care two hoots in hell whether you do or not. I've told you.'

'What you've told me,' the sergeant said, 'doesn't make sense. It must be obvious to you that it doesn't make sense. I therefore ask you now whether you would like to reconsider your story – and at the same time, tell me the name of the child's father?'

Fletton stood up. 'You're not accusing me –?' he said.

'I'm not accusing you of anything,' the sergeant said. 'This whole matter is serious – more serious than you seem to realize. I'm sorry,' he said magnanimously, 'to see a gentleman like yourself mixed up in it, and that's a fact. I don't presume to know what the magistrates will think of it – I don't even know whether it's a case for them: it may have to go to Assizes – but in the meantime I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to come with me.'

'You're arresting me?' Fletton said incredulously.

'Not at all,' the sergeant said. 'I'm asking you to come with me for further questioning. I'll see the girl first, and then send up a doctor –'

Fletton found his voice. 'And what if I tell you to go to blazes?' he said.

'I shouldn't do that, sir,' the sergeant said, 'if I were you. It's open to have all kinds of meanings put on it. And it'd only delay things, not settle anything. In that case I should leave Constable Helliwell here, and proceed to obtain a warrant for your arrest –'

'On what charge?' Fletton said in a stifled voice.

'Attempted abduction,' the sergeant said, 'to begin with – pending enquiries as to the child's parentage –'

Fletton stood up. 'And what about the girl's father?' he said. 'Has he no say in this programme of yours?'

'I imagine he'll have plenty to say,' the sergeant said comfortably. 'The last time I saw him he –'

Harriet came in, followed by Gribble.

'Hallo,' she said. 'Are we interrupting something?'

Fletton sat down.

'Good afternoon, Miss Barnes,' the sergeant said. 'Afternoon, Mr Gribble. I'm glad to tell you that we've located your daughter –'

'Oh, we know that,' Harriet said. 'I've just brought Mr Gribble to see his daughter – and his grandson.' She looked at Gribble.

He cleared his throat. 'That's right,' he said. 'This is a very 'appy day for me, very 'appy.' He smiled painfully.

'Finding my girl – and in such good 'ands too.' His eyes went from face to face, and found Harriet's still on him. 'I've got to thank you, Sir Godfrey,' he said as if something had pricked him, 'for giving 'er a good 'ome, and looking after 'er when she was daft enough to run away from 'er owd father.' He swallowed.

The sergeant moved across to him. 'Do I understand,' he said heavily, 'that you're not going to prefer any charges?'

'Charges?' Gribble said. 'What charges?' A shadow of malice appeared on his face. 'What for?' The sergeant's discomfiture at any rate afforded him a little satisfaction.

'There's the child,' the sergeant said.

'What's done's done,' Gribble said. 'And crying over spilt milk never put it back in t'jug. T'lad's going to marry her, and that's that.'

'What lad?' the sergeant said.

'Ted Sloan,' Gribble said through his teeth. He swallowed again. 'If I sued him I'd get nowt. But he's marrying her, anyhow.'

'Ted Sloan?' the sergeant said blankly.

'The father of the child,' Harriet said.

The sergeant said nothing; he fought out his battle internally. Then he turned to Fletton. 'I can't promise you'll hear no more of this, Sir Godfrey,' he said. 'But meanwhile I'm obviously wasting your time. Good afternoon.' He went out. Helliwell followed him. Fletton watched them go.

Then: 'Shan't be a minute,' he said to Harriet. He caught the two policemen in the hall. 'Sergeant,' he said. 'One moment.' ✓

The sergeant waited.

'I owe you an apology,' Fletton said. 'And an explanation. And this goes for Constable Helliwell too. And before I say any more I want you to understand that I'm not in any way trying to influence any future action you feel it your duty to take. You'll do your duty, I know.' The sergeant still said nothing. 'This is what I wanted to say,' Fletton said. 'Everything I've said to you has been true.'

But I wasn't helpful. I resented your interference, or what I thought was your interference. I was wrong. I'm sure that if I had been freely open with you from the beginning a lot of trouble would have been saved. If I say I've been going through a tough time myself it sounds like a whine, so I won't ask you to take that into account. I'll just say again that I'm extremely sorry – and very grateful to you for the tact and forbearance you've shown in doing what you certainly had to do. That's all.'

The sergeant inclined his head. 'Very well,' he said. 'Thank you.' He thrust his chin into the air, left and right. 'I appreciate your frankness. Good day, sir.' Helliwell said: 'Good day, sir.' He touched his cap and pulled down his tunic all round. They went down the steps together, in solid unison.

Fletton went back into the kitchen. 'Where's Gribble?' he said to Harriet.

'I took him up to Sue,' she said. 'He – turned quite human, so I left them.'

'How did you do it?' he said.

'Do what?' she said.

'Work it,' he said.

She smiled. 'Blackmail,' she said. 'Naked and unashamed. I know a bit about Mr Gribble, and what I didn't know I made up. I told him I'd get father to expose him from the pulpit. I Sir-Godfrey'd him till he was dizzy. He's a craven little brute.'

'You're unscrupulous,' he said. 'Dangerous.'

'Don't cross me,' she said.

Ted came in. 'I've got t'milk,' he said cheerfully. 'I'd to wait hours –'

'Ted,' Fletton said. 'Know who's upstairs?'

Ted looked puzzled. 'Sue,' he said. 'And t'little lad.'

'Your father-in-law to be,' Fletton said. 'Mr Gribble.'

'Oh, crumbs,' Ted said.

'I don't think he's feeling too pleased with you,' Fletton said. 'I'd clear out if I were you.'

'Aye,' Ted said. 'You're reight, Captain.' He made for the door.

'And another thing,' Fletton said. 'I think your mother ought to be told – before he tells her.'

Ted turned. His face was one of pure terror.

'Who's going to tell *her*?' he brought out.

'You are,' Fletton said. 'It's your job. Go and get it off your chest like a man.'

'Oh, crumbs,' Ted said mournfully. He went out with dragging feet.

Fletton sat down. He looked at Harriet; she looked back at him.

'So it's all fizzled out,' he said at last.

'Things do,' she said.

He passed a hand through his hair. 'You know,' he said. 'I feel – let down. Tired '

'That's peace,' she said 'It's like that. You have to fight it like blazes.'

RECENT PENGUIN FICTION

Europe compares herself with America in three fields of fiction in the early months of 1913. The first is humour, where P. G. Wodehouse, the great ambassador of British comedy, meets the inimitable Thurber. Hilaire Belloc once described the former as 'the best writer of English now alive', and claimed for his perfect 'gentleman's gentleman' a place 'in that long gallery of living figures that make up the glory of English fiction'. With this recommendation, Jeeves and his fellow-characters now appear for the first time before a Penguin audience, in five volumes of their most ridiculous escapades. James Thurber follows a little later with a single-volume collection of the best of his writings and drawings. *The Thurber Carnival* (2s 6d) displays every side of their creator's genius – his wild humour, innocent wisdom and strangely-gifted artistry – which together make up something unique in the literary world of to-day.

Tom Lea's *The Brave Bulls* only fits with difficulty under the heading of adventure: it is really a documentary of the whole complex organization of the Mexican bullfight industry. Nevertheless, its dramatic account of a famous matador's experiences in the arena, and its revelation of the hopes, lusts and fears of the men who fight the brave bulls are strong reasons for coupling it with John Buchan's *The Three Hostages*. The latter is the first of the author's great adventure classics to be published as a Penguin. It features his most famous hero, Richard Hannay, in a search for three people kidnapped by a vast criminal combine, and a fight with the strongest enemy of his career.

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* are both important treatments of the psychological novel, but otherwise it must be confessed they have little in common. *The Trial*, which was originally written in German,

relates the perplexing experiences of a man ostensibly arrested on a charge which is never specified. It is a strange Pilgrim's Progress of the subconscious; and it reads like the transcript of a protracted implausible dream, in which reality is fantastically entangled with imagination. *Sanctuary* is a profound, realistic and terrible novel by the 1919 Nobel Prizewinner. Its background is Tennessee and America's Deep South: its characters a group of social misfits and outcasts whose fates become involved in a pitiful miscarriage of justice.

Other new and recently reprinted Penguins include:

HOWARDS END – *E. M. Forster*

A closely-constructed story of the lives of two sisters by one of the finest of contemporary prose writers (311)

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH – *Samuel Butler*

A great English classic and a full-size picture of life in Victorian England (511) 2s 6d

MR NORRIS CHANGES TRAINS – *Christopher Isherwood*

The story of a delightful rogue, the setting being Germany immediately before the war (321)

AN AVENUE OF STONE – *Pamela Hansford Johnson*

The story of an ex-actress who still has enough vitality and character to fight off the realization of old age (921)

DEVIL'S CUB – *Georgette Heyer*

A full-blooded historical romance of Regency times. 'Georgette Heyer can bring history to life.' – *Sunday Times* (910)

2s each except where marked otherwise

POETS AND CRITICS

'As a poet Milton seems to me probably the greatest of all eccentrics,' wrote T. S. Eliot in 1917. The sentence is taken from one of the most important essays printed in a Penguin collection of Mr Eliot's prose, which represents his opinions on literature and society during the past thirty-five years. Edited by John Hayward, it contains twelve complete essays and addresses with passages chosen from some forty others, and together these provide a comprehensive introduction to one of the finest and most original critical minds of our time. There are two articles in it on Milton, much of whose work is reproduced in another new Penguin, edited and introduced by L. D. Lerner (2s 6d). Mr Lerner's emphasis has been on completeness: the selection includes the whole of *Lycidas*, *Comus*, *The Nativity Hymn*, *Samson Agonistes*, three complete books of *Paradise Lost*, and the arguments of the other nine.

A poet sometimes compared with Milton is Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest who lived two hundred years later, and whose rhythms and word-usage have had such a profound influence on modern verse. W. H. Gardner, the editor of the standard Third Edition of his poems, has brought into a single Penguin volume the best of these and certain chosen passages from his prose (2s 6d).

Two ancient Greek rivals meet again in the Classics series. The arrival of *Ajax*, *Electra*, *The Women of Trachis*, and *Philoctetes* completes E. F. Watling's two-volume translation of the extant plays of Sophocles; and Philip Vellacott has provided a new version of the *Alcestis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Hippolytus* of Euripides. Finally, for younger readers, in the Puffin Story Book series there is the long-awaited *Puffin Book of Verse* (2s 6d), which is an anthology of poetry of every kind and every period for children of all ages. It has been compiled and arranged in sections, according to

the subjects treated, by the general editor of the series,
Eleanor Graham.

Other Penguin Poets include:

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T. S. Eliot (D 4). Selected by himself

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